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OR,

The Beautiful Navajo's Mission.

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AUTHOR OF "BLANCO BILL," "KING KENT,"
"BIG FOOT WALLACE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE DUKE OF THE DEMIJOHNS.

NUGGET NOTCH was the name given to a yawning break in the Mogollon Mountains, a range of considerable extent, that branches off eastward from the Pinalenos; the latter extending in a nearly northerly and southerly direction, in the southeastern part of Arizona.

One would judge that some terrific convulsion of Nature had forced upward from below that particular portion of the range, causing the parting of the peaks. In fact there was considerable of a passageway at the bottom of this stupendous rent, the seamed and rocky sides of which towered skyward, with here and there adamant shelves, steep cliffs, and almost every conceivable shape of rock.

To the eye of a person at a little distance from

"LOOK, PRINCE! DO YOU KNOW THAT MAN?"

this great notch or gap, it would appear that a huge triangular portion of the range had been broken out and carried away.

An eccentric old miner of the vicinity often asserted that Nugget Notch "war bu'sted out by a ragin', roarin' ole he-cyclone; ther hull o' ther rock what war gone bein' ground up inter dust an' sand, an' whirled eastward. An' this war how ther Sand Hills o' ther Staked Plains war manerfactured."

To those who had ever witnessed the terribly destructive power of a cyclone, this explanation of the old miner was not extremely unreasonable, especially when he had added, as follows:

"Cyclones used ter rip up things wusser than nowadays. Thar's ther Col'rado Canyon. Hit war plowed up by a cyclone, es anybody what hes es many brains es a perrarer rat, orter know by the way she meanders. Any galoot what'll foller ther trail o' a cyclone, and then, arter that, meander up er down Col'rado Canyon, will sw'ar hit's ther same trail, jist scooped out nigh a'most down ter Chiny."

But speculations as to its origin, made little difference to those who had been drawn to Nugget Notch. The first prospectors had discovered a very valuable nugget, in the search for "pockets" that had first been instituted; the same being almost entirely virgin gold, and thus giving the gap its name. This, in a little time, was fastened on the collection of shanties, tents, and dug-outs, which soon sprung up as if by magic.

Within the Notch, and along the base of the southern side of the range, were cool springs, from which flowed little streams, all uniting, and flowing southward, thus forming the Rio San Carlos, a tributary of the Gila. This last flows through a veritable land of gold—a land, which the fierce and merciless Apaches call, and with truth, their own.

Forty miles north of the range, and coursing westward to empty its waters into the Great Colorado of the Pacific slope, runs the Little Colorado, in a nearly parallel line with the Mogollon Range.

The foot-hills were partially wooded, and at the base of the range, for some distance, were scattered rocks and boulders of every conceivable shape and size, some of which could not have been climbed up by man except with the aid of ladders.

Pines were growing among these, affording hundreds of lurking-places for savage beasts, and the more to be feared savage Apaches.

The "find," that had added Nugget Notch to the sparsely settled territory of southeastern Arizona, was "struck" but a short time after the great stampede to Tombstone, and many of the rougher and more desperate characters, to say nothing of the inevitable range bums, had lounged out from that burg for the new "strike" at Nugget Notch.

In fact, the worst element of Tombstone and other new mining towns had been forced to levant, for, it is only in the first all-absorbing excitement at a new "find" that such characters are permitted to remain on any terms.

There were also many speculators, grocery dealers, and teamsters, who added to the population—the last mentioned having, as usual, made a good thing of it, in their conveying freight from Tucson and other points.

Besides, there was quite a number of Greasers, who, with their ox-teams, had brought nearly all the building material to the Notch. These Mexicans had remained, with an eye to increasing the *pecos* in their pouches, in some manner outside of mining, as they well knew, if they should strike a rich claim, their lives would not be worth a *rial*.

In a direct line, it was not more than one hundred and fifty miles from Nugget Notch to Tucson, but it was considerably more than two hundred, by the necessarily serpentine course of the sage-trail. As might reasonably be supposed, the bed of the Notch, after the wash of ages, had accumulated soil to a considerable extent, and, where rocks, trees, and cacti did not prevent, there was a carpet of rich grass and flowers.

The town had been laid out far different from the general mountain mining burg, the houses being built upon four sides of quite a large square or plaza. This was probably from the fact, that those who first planned the "locate" were men who had passed years on the frontiers of the Land of the Montezumas.

In the same manner as in a Mexican town, traveled ways, which could scarcely be called streets, led out from the plaza at each of its four corners; but, except the slab and rough board buildings which fronted on the square, none were more than mere temporary camps, scattered, in an irregular manner to the base of the cliffs.

The plaza was nearly half an acre in extent, quite level, and had been grass-grown, but the many wagons, carts, quadrupeds, and bipeds that had trampled and been drawn over it, had left not a single vestige of verdure.

There were several stores on the east and south sides of the square. These were sandwiched between whisky shanties, at which every article necessary for the use of miners and teamsters could be obtained, but only at the most exorbitant rates.

On the west side of the plaza was the largest building in the burg. It was a public house, or hotel, gaming, drinking and fandango house combined. It was also the stage station.

This establishment gloried in the not inappropriate name of Buglepaint Bazaar.

It was some sixty feet in length and twenty in width, the entire lower portion being one long room, the bar occupying one-third of the same in front, next the plaza. The remainder was devoted to gaming, smoking and general loafing, there being numerous benches and roulette tables, with others for faro and monte.

The bar was furnished in quite civilized style, having a huge French mirror behind the counter, at each side of which were shelves for glasses and decanters.

Buglepaint Bazaar had been built and fitted up to stay. So it appeared from the large amount of money which had been expended, proving that the proprietor had the utmost confidence in the success of the burg as a burg, and the mines as paying mines.

It was also apparent that the proprietor had the future in view, and a promising future at that, for the entire population of the town would not have half-filled the lower portion of his establishment at the time he began business, and that was just two weeks after the rush had commenced. And, although he had allowed for a large fandango by removing benches and tables, there had not been a woman in the burg, one or two "stag dances" being all that had been indulged in.

These, however, had been lively and exciting enough as may be, perhaps, imagined.

The Bazaar "ran from sun-up to sun-up," if the patrons were numerous and "irrigated" as often as was thought to be the square thing.

The owner and manager of this delectable hotel gloried in the appellation of "Big Bugle," from the fact that he had an immense proboscis, which gave him an exceedingly comical appearance. He was short and fleshy, being nearly as thick as he was tall, and the nose referred to was not merely in size a deformity, but was colored to an almost purple tint, from constant and copious use of the beverages which he retailed at his own counter.

The "boys," even on short acquaintance, could tell the state of Big Bugle's mind pretty accurately by looking at his nose, it varying greatly in depth of color, as he "touched the crystals" quite often, or only occasionally.

As may be presumed the peculiar and suggestive name of the hotel originated more from the fact that the landlord was thus ornamented than from the trade transacted therein being chiefly the selling of whisky, there known as "Buglepaint."

Big Bugle was quite a prominent character in the town, as is usually the case with men of his calling in any "locate" of the Wild West.

He was a German, who had "struck it rich" by investing in town lots during the first stampede to Tombstone, he selling the same at a very high price soon after.

In describing his personal appearance, one could not possibly omit his ears, which were not only very large, but were made more noticeable from the fact that there was a circular hole through the upper lobe of each.

And thereby hangs a tale.

Big Bugle had lived in Texas. Indeed, he was fond of calling himself a Texan, and of expressing his belief that the Lone Star State ruled the world, including Deutschland.

But, notwithstanding, there were some within that State whom he hated with all the intensity of which he was capable, and who were in his thoughts when most under the influence of liquor.

He had kept a bar in one of the border towns of Texas, where cowboys at times ran in on him and had things their own way. On one occasion, when our Teutonic friend had remonstrated with a party of these wild riders after long-horns, refusing to sell or give them any more liquor, they had amused themselves by securing him against the side of his bar-room, when they had made a night of it, drinking his liquors, and having "stag dances," interlarded with indiscriminate shooting of revolvers. They then closed their wild festivities, by one of them pinning a string to the lobe of the luckless landlord's ear, which he pulled, extending that member, while another shot a bullet through it, amid deafening yells, and whoops, and laughter. The hilarious horde insisted upon thus marking each ear of Big Bugle, as cattle are dealt with to prove ownership.

The fright of Big Bugle during the cowboy circus was beyond description.

The humiliating outrage of that night had been branded upon the poor German's brain, never to be effaced.

"I has dose bictures of dem gowpoys in mine headt," he would frequently swear; "und ven I gets dose beebers of mine on von—vell, you vill see vat Pig Puggle do mit him, alreaty."

This he would repeat, again and again, shaking his clinched, fat fists in the air, as he walked back and forth behind his bar, more comical in his rage than at any other time.

So much for the Duke of the Demijohns in Nugget Notch.

CHAPTER II.

IN PERIL AMONG THE APACHES.

NUGGET NOTCH had a sheriff in the person of Boss Blazer, a gigantic man in strength and stature, and who had gained his *sobriquet* from his remarkable dexterity and quick movement of fingers, in extending a revolver in each hand, cocking the weapon, and pressing triggers so fast, as to cause a continuous blaze of fire from the muzzles—this of course in the night-time.

Some fifty yards from the plaza, and close up against the southern side-wall of the great inward curve of the towering wall of rock which formed the west side of the Notch, was a substantial cabin of logs, the same being quite large and seemingly in a very dangerous position, from an immense overhanging spur. This dwelling had been built long before the discovery of gold, and the laying out of the town.

It was the home of an old hermit, who had thus lived alone for a long time, being well known and respected by the wandering Indians, who believed him to be a "Medicine Man."

He was called by the miners "Old Mystery," and was never intruded upon or molested, by even the most desperate and lawless.

Old Mystery was seldom seen by day, but constantly roamed the range at night.

The population of Nugget Notch was of the most heterogeneous character. In any small crowd one could hear mongrel Spanish, French, Italian, German, English, with a spice of the Irish brogue, interspersed with the—to a "tenderfoot"—unintelligible slang of mines and plains. Such were the denizens of the burg, and of many of them it might be said, they would rather fight than eat.

There was, in the rear of Buglepaint Bazaar, a large roofed shed, with but one side boarded, and under which were several long tables and benches of rude workmanship. This was the general loafing and smoking-room of the town.

Since the place had a local habitation and a name, it had seen but little excitement, tragic or comic, for the reason that every one had been occupied in erecting his own rude habitation, and in prospecting. Nugget Notch was, however, destined to be the scene of peculiar and startling events, causing both mirth and misery, to those who had "struck the locate to stay," as well as to those who, by their star of destiny, were being led to that gigantic break in the Mogollon Mountains of Arizona.

There had, however, been one startling occurrence up the range, and within ten miles of the town; which, although the principal actor in it had been for some time a resident of the Notch, was unknown to any one in the burg.

At the beginning of the rush, two men, both young, had arrived from Tucson, and put up a cabin together, the general meaning of which can only be understood by those who have spent some time on the borders. One was a dark-eyed, dark-complexioned young man of a surly disposition, and with the stamp of villain plainly imprinted on his countenance. He was of strong build, although not large of stature, and quick to move and act.

His companion was of about the same age—that is, some two and twenty—but very different in appearance and character. He was a slave to drink—that much was evident—and this had dulled his perceptions, and changed him in many ways. One could see that he had been exceedingly handsome.

Although the first mentioned was a villain beyond all doubt, and the latter just the opposite, yet the former had in every way the control and upper hand. They were known as brothers, yet few believed there was any relationship in reality between them. Their names were William and Buckland Bradley—Buck, as he was called, being the dark-visaged one.

Little notice had been taken of either of them. Their cabin was on the north of the space in which the town was located, and on the opposite side from the log house of Old Mystery, which was called the Fort.

But to explain what had happened.

Bill Bradley was an unobtrusive and diffident young man, and much given to lone wanderings in the mountains, he having evidently a burden of some kind on his mind, which gave him a care-worn expression, and was probably one cause of his drinking to excess.

It is in one of his wanderings that we will now follow him.

He first procured a flask of whisky from Big Bugle, and soon after mid-day shouldered his rifle, and started up the range, amid the foot-hills. He was clad in the rough costume of a miner, but his soft and delicate hands had little the appearance of having handled pick or shovel. As he went on, he seemed to become more free from the feelings that depressed him; his eyes brightened, and he shot keen glances on every side.

The day was extremely hot, but Bill noticed not the discomfort of traveling; continuing on until fully ten miles had been passed over, when he reached the entrance to a great gorge in the range. Here, a tiny streamlet afforded him a draught of pure, cold water; but he raised his flask to his lips, and quaffed the vile poison

first. Then, after bathing his flushed face, he climbed upon a huge boulder, around which grew a fringe of pines.

The trees on the higher side were of sufficient height to afford him the shade he sought; while he sat, overlooking the country toward the Little Colorado, to ascertain if he could catch a sight of any game that was worth the trouble of stalking.

He had not been long thus occupied, when an ejaculation of astonishment burst from his lips. It was no wonder.

It was an unexpected and alarming sight, which, upon closer inspection, awakened all the chivalry in his nature, causing him, in place of seeking a secure hiding-place, to resolve to risk his life.

That which he beheld was a half-dozen hideous Apaches, in all their horrible war-stripes and war-gear. They were approaching the range from the Little Colorado, in Indian style, one riding after the other, and making evidently for the very gorge at the entrance of which he had halted.

They were mounted upon small, wiry mustangs, now spattered with foam, and had in the way of arms, as Bradley perceived, rifles, pistols and knives, as well as bows and arrows, while one carried an army saber attached to his belt.

The first impulse of the young man had been to secrete himself and strike back to the town, for he knew that he was in great danger. But, upon closer inspection of the approaching savages, he became confident that the red fiend had a captive.

As all were in a line, riding toward him, this had been impossible to detect at first, but, as the Apaches came nearer, and one of the mustangs stumbled to one side, forcing the rider to jerk the animal half round to regain his position in the line, Bill discovered that behind this savage was a beautiful squaw, whose face was almost white.

He saw, also, that her wrists were bound fast in front of her captor, she having been forced to clasp her arms around the brave. Her finely-chiseled face, he could see, expressed the most abject terror and despair.

As he gained a closer view, when the red demons came within pistol-shot from his covert, Bill recognized the squaw as one he had met, not only in Tombstone, but at Tucson—one known, admired, and respected by even the roughest of the roughs. It was Nonita, the Navajo.

In what manner she had become a captive to the Apaches, he could not even guess, but he resolved that he would save her, or die in the attempt.

Nonita had never betrayed the slightest fear of William Bradley, even when he had been wild with drink. She had, indeed, more than once pleaded with him to let fire-water alone, and he promised to give heed to her words. But his vows had been as cobwebs, easily broken; nevertheless, he had not forgotten the only one who had ever spoken kindly to him in his degradation.

Bill knew that the savages would pass directly by the boulder upon which he was, and that it was more than likely he had left some "sign" near the stream at which he had drank. He, therefore, made ready to defend himself, but his first shot, he resolved, would be at the brave to whom the captive was secured.

Flat upon the boulder Bill lay, his Winchester ready, and revolvers lying upon the rock beside him. Thus he waited, not daring to gaze downward or expose himself in the least.

But his senses were strained, and he was ready to act on the instant.

He listened intently and soon knew that the Apaches had passed the boulder.

Then one idea shot through his brain.

He would relieve Nonita by letting her know she had a friend near. The risk was great, but he would attempt it. Slowly he raised his head, and peeped over the pines.

Luckily the face of the Indian maiden was turned toward him, and their eyes met.

He placed a finger on his lips, then clasped his hands together, and exposed them in token of friendship.

Only for one moment did the Navajo girl see this suggestive picture above the pines; and, although astonished, she made no sign, nor changed her position in the least. But hope dawned upon her for she knew that what she saw was real—that a friend was near, and though probably alone, he would brave death in any form to aid and rescue her.

Up the rough, rock-walled, and rock-strewn gorge went the hideous Apache braves, bearing to a fate worse than death, and to terrible torture, the beautiful and helpless child of the plains, Nonita, the Navajo!

CHAPTER III. AT ANY COST.

AFTER the Apaches had disappeared around a turn in the gorge, Bill Bradley descended from the boulder, and cautiously followed them. He did not believe the savages would proceed far. Indeed, that would have been impossible, for the gorge extended only about a quarter of a mile into the range.

Bill soon had unmistakable evidence that they

had halted, for he caught a glimpse of several of the mustangs, which, having been divested of their equipments, were rolling on the green sward near a spring.

He was rejoiced to discover that there were pines growing quite thick along the side of the canyon, the branches reaching even to the ground. Taking advantage of this favorable cover, he continued to advance until he found himself quite near to the Apache camp.

Cautiously he parted the pine boughs. The scene that presented itself was truly terrible.

The captive had been bound to a stake by her waist and wrists, and the hideous braves were standing around, gesticulating and conversing in the language of their tribe, which was evidently understood by the poor maiden.

The inhuman monsters were discussing the different modes of torture they would practice upon their helpless victim. All this was terrible to poor Nonita, whose misery and despair must have, by this time, driven all thoughts of her probable rescuer from her mind.

It is quite possible that, in her then state of mind, she deemed it a vision of her imagination, and that she had not really seen William Bradley. So thought the latter.

He was now desperately furious.

He had hoped that one or two of the Indians would have left the others for game, or to search for "sign" of enemies. But, there seemed no alternative; to make a reckless and desperate onslaught alone upon the six burly braves—seemed his only course.

It did not seem possible to Bill that he could slay them all. It would be absurd to think of so doing.

It would be far better to wait, and perhaps some of the number might leave the camp for a few minutes. Yet, the agony of mind, which he knew Nonita must be suffering, also tortured him greatly, and he could scarce control himself.

From the maiden's manner, and her utterly hopeless and horrified appearance, Bill believed she had no thought of his being near at hand.

Providentially, the young man was, at the right moment, relieved from the great strain upon his mind, by one of the Apaches springing erect, and stalking out from the camp.

Bill was greatly relieved.

There now appeared hope of accomplishing his object, although he noticed that the savage had taken his arms with him, and was evidently on the alert.

Soon a second arose also, and wandered from the camp, going in hasty strides toward the entrance of the gorge, as if he had been previously selected as a sentinel. At length only two remained, and they began at once to gather wood, preparatory to cooking the evening meal.

The lurker felt that the time had arrived for him to plan and act. He stole around, as stealthily as was possible, to a position in the rear of the captive, still keeping concealed among the pines.

Hardly had he gained this position, when one of the two remaining braves sprung to his feet, and bounded to the front of Nonita; clasp his paint-daubed arms about her. A piercing cry of horror and loathing came from the poor maiden's lips, and was echoed by the death-howl of the red fiend, whose arms flew upward, as he staggered back, and fell dead at her feet.

The bullet of Bill Bradley had torn through the Apache's brain.

The report of the Winchester was close followed by another, both sounding terribly, in the gorge, echoing in rift and cavern. At the second shot, the Apache, who had been still seated, sprung in the air, and he also fell back dead.

Then, with blood-curdling war-whoops, the others rushed back to the camp.

No sooner had Bill made sure of the two in the camp, than he sprung to the side of the captive, knife in hand, quickly cutting her free, as he cried out:

"Be brave, Nonita, and I'll save you! Help me if you can. Here is a revolver. There are but four of the red demons remaining."

Poor Nonita was so astounded, so filled with relief and gratitude, that she could not utter a word. She could only gaze into the eyes of Bill Bradley—eyes which were now wild and glaring with fury and desperation.

She caught at the revolver, but her wrists were stiff, and she was at first almost powerless to use the weapon. Firmly she stood beside her rescuer to repel the four yelling fiends.

"Back, Nonita! Back to the wall, or we are lost!" cried Bill. "There are two above and two below. We are between two fires."

So saying, the young man brought his rifle to his shoulder again; but a report from that of an Apache sounded an instant before his, a bullet tearing through his sombrero and his hair. But he who had fired that close shot would never press trigger again. Bill Bradley had bead on the Indian, and the next moment he lay dead among his mustangs.

Bill then brought his Winchester to bear upon the brave who had gone down toward the mouth of the gorge. He fell, but it was evident he had not received a mortal wound.

By this time, Nonita had fully comprehended the position of affairs, and sood with revolver pointed. Well was it that she was thus posted, for she had just time to give a cry of warning to Bill, when, out from the pines, not ten paces distant from the pair, bounded the remaining savages. There had been no time for our friends to gain the wall of the gorge.

The two Apaches, as it providentially happened, were without fire-arms, but each held a long scalping-knife in his hand, and their faces were filled with vengeful fury and a thirst for blood. Bill whirled, but there was no time to use either rifle or revolver.

There was but one move to make.

"Shoot, Nonita! For God's sake, shoot!"

Thus he yelled, as he clubbed his rifle, bringing it down upon the head of a savage, who fell to the earth. Bill had heard the report of Nonita's pistol, and he turned to behold a fearful sight. This was the maiden in the clutch of the one Apache who was still alive.

As the young man turned his eyes, the knife of the Indian was uplifted over the shrinking form of Nonita, whose revolver had been struck from her hand. Bounding forward, Bill caught the arm of the brave, and the Apache was not only forced to drop his knife, but to relinquish his hold upon his captive.

Then white and red clinched, neither having a weapon in his hand. It was but for a moment. Both fell upon the ground, rolling over and over upon the sward.

The maiden for a time was helpless.

Even when she had in a measure recovered, she found it impossible to assist her brave deliverer, so rapid were the movements of the writhing pair. She picked up her revolver, but dared not use it, for fear of slaying or wounding her rescuer.

The struggle between the two was terrible.

A moment seemed an hour to Nonita, as she gazed in dread anxiety. She could not withdraw her gaze, and would not, had not a most startling and unexpected event occurred. This was no less than the loud report of a rifle just beside her.

Quick as a flash she turned, and discovered the Apache who had been felled, now in a sitting posture, with Bill's Winchester leveled, and still smoking.

Her heart sprung to her throat. She darted a look back and beheld Bill Bradley lying upon his back, motionless and apparently dead.

The Apache was too exhausted to arise.

He was breathing heavily, yet striving to remove the bowie from his opponent's belt.

Instantly Nonita became, as it were, transformed into a veritable tigress.

With a wild cry she sprung forward, thrust the muzzle of her revolver against the head of the red fiend, and pressed the trigger.

The savage gave one horrible death-howl, and sunk over upon his foe, dead.

No sooner had Nonita's weapon done its work, than she turned quickly toward the other Apache, and none too soon, for he was now struggling to his feet, knife in hand.

The blow Bill had given him had merely dazed him, and he was now awake to his desperate and almost hopeless position. His only chance for life was to slay Nonita, and at once.

With that intention he staggered to his feet, but the young Navajo squaw stood confronting him, with blazing eyes. She was equal to the emergency.

Only sufficient time had the savage to clearly comprehend the situation; then the revolver spoke, and the last Apache dropped dead almost at her very feet, while with a moan of anguish, the maiden rushed to the side of her rescuer, and tossed the dead brave from his body.

Quickly, with lips parted, and her eyes filled with the deepest apprehension, Nonita felt the breast and wrist of the heroic young man. Her face lighted up with joy and thankfulness, which was increased when she had examined his head, finding there but a scalp wound.

Pouring some water upon his face, and between his lips, she ran to the spring for a further supply. Between this and the Apache camp were a number of pines and willows, which concealed the scene of the fight from her view.

Poor Nonita drank, and then laved her heated brow. Filling a gourd, she started to return.

Before she reached the spot where she had left her preserver, but on the ground over which he had rolled in his struggles with the Apache, the maiden perceived a paper package, which she knew Bill must have lost in the fight. This she thrust in her bosom, and went on; the tall grass hiding the corpses, except when close upon them.

A shriek of anguish left Nonita's lips, as she reached the point at which she had left her rescuer insensible.

The senseless form of William Bradley was no longer there!

With that loud and bitter cry, utterly crushed by such fearful anguish and horror, added to her previous torture of mind and body, Nonita sunk, unconscious, beside the loathsome corpse of the Apache she had slain with her own hand.

CHAPTER IV.

AT CROSS-PURPOSES.

HAD Nonita been able to control herself, and examined the trampled grass, she could easily have accounted for the manner of her rescuer's disappearance.

But, to explain.

The savage, who had been shot through the right breast by Bradley, was only severely wounded. But, although bleeding internally, and suffering most excruciating agony, yet, with the fortitude of his race, and a thirst for revenge, he managed to crawl to the scene of the fight.

He had witnessed the slaying of the last two braves by Nonita. He had not dreamed that the Navajo squaw could have accomplished the death of his brother warriors, and he saw that he must adopt very cautious measures, or he too would become her victim. Indeed, he had little hope of leaving the gorge alive, for he felt that the hand of death was upon him.

When he saw Nonita depart toward the spring, the Apache knew not only that the hated white man lived, but he also knew that the time for him to act, if he was ever to do so, had come.

Consequently he braced himself, repudiated the torture of his wound, and dragged himself from the pines to the side of the senseless Bill Bradley. Then, rising to his feet, he clutched the body of his foe, and dragged it to the pines at the base of the wall of the gorge, which was but a few paces distant.

The Indian succeeded in falling forward, with his captive into the shades, but the exertion was too much for him. The blood welled from his mouth, and he lay unable to move a muscle.

There, in low, guttural tone, he chanted his monotonous death-song, for he felt that the spirits of his fathers were whispering to him, and the "long dark trail" was open.

Scarcely was all silent when a wild-looking man, attired in fantastic style, strode up the gorge, halting beside the apparently dead Nonita. Though a white man, he was nearly as dark as an Indian, and his eyes glittered with an insane light. When he beheld the dead Apache he shook his clinched fist at the body.

The sight of the Indian maiden seemed, however, to calm him. When he ascertained that she had but fainted, he caught her up in his arms and hastened from the gorge.

In a little time William Bradley partially recovered his senses. Slowly the near past came back to him, and he crawled out from the shades without perceiving the dead Apache lying so near him. Upon reflection, he knew that the savage with whom he had been struggling for life could not have been the one who had rendered him unconscious. That must have been done by the one whom he had knocked down with his rifle.

When he saw the two corpses at the spot where he and the young squaw had turned to face them, he knew that the latter must have saved his life by shooting both of them.

But where was Nonita?

Had she, after doing so much for him, left him to die in the pines?

This did not seem consistent with her nature.

Surely she had not gone away of her own free will.

The young man went from point to point, and counted the corpses of the Apaches.

One of the braves was missing.

No longer was Nonita's absence a mystery.

In the very moment of victory the poor girl had been captured by the only surviving savage and carried away.

All his efforts had been fruitless.

He was now in a more dangerous position than at the first. There was some hope then, but now none.

The dark mantle of night was now falling, and William Bradley knew that he had but a short time to search for "sign."

He recovered his Winchester rifle and also his knife, which he replaced in the scabbard. Mechanically he strolled about the gorge, at a loss to decide in what way he could aid Nonita.

Had he but discovered and followed up the plain "sign" left by the Apache who had dragged him into the pines, his mind would have been more at ease. He would have the Indian—the last of the party—dead, and would have known that the fair Navajo was not in the power of a savage.

Bill, in no enviable state of mind, wandered the gorge until darkness set in. Then, utterly discouraged, he started to descend the rocky bed, intending to return to Nugget Notch. Soon, however, he lost his footing, and fell forward, his head striking a rock, depriving him again of all consciousness.

A minute more, and out from the thicket stole the same wildly attired man who had borne Nonita away from the gorge.

With an insane glare in his eyes, he sprang forward, caught up the form of Bill Bradley, and carried him away also.

He then dashed out from the gorge, and hastened down the range for full a hundred yards, when he turned, and sped up the rocky side of the mountain, making great bounds from rock to rock, springing over yawning chasms, and

running along narrow shelves, where, to have made a misstep would have hurled him to the jagged rocks far below.

Thus was the journey of the wild man made, until he was far up the side of the range. He then darted into a great seam in the rock-wall of the mountain, and following it some distance, entered a cave-like opening. This chamber was partly lighted up with pine torches.

From this he continued on with his burden, into a dark passage; which led to a smaller cave; where, upon a couch of skins, he placed the still senseless form of the young man.

As he passed through the partially illumined cave-chamber, on his way, a female form stole stealthily by him. It was that of Nonita, now escaping from the mountain home of the Wild Man.

But she sped not far, for she was obliged to proceed with great caution along the dangerous path down the side of the range.

Had she observed what it was that the strange being carried, she would no doubt have remained in the cavern. While she had been there, after she had recovered her consciousness, she had been filled with the greatest anxiety in connection with the mysterious and unaccountable disappearance of her rescuer.

She had gone, as we have seen to the spring for water, leaving him senseless upon the ground.

Upon her return, her had vanished.

Since she had had time to reason upon this disappearance, Nonita had formed the only theory upon the subject, that was, she believed, under the circumstances possible.

It was, that Bill had recovered as soon as she had left him, and had dashed through the pines, out from the gorge, and then down the range to Nugget Notch.

In the dazed and demoralized state, consequent upon his wound, that seemed only reasonable.

He could have no recollection of her, or the cause of his fight with the Apaches; perhaps believing that some of the savages had escaped, and would bring others to the rescue, when he would be butchered in cold blood, or else taken captive and tortured.

Thus reasoning, Nonita resolved that she would appropriate one of the Apache mustangs, speed down the range, and through the Notch, by night, and then proceed to Tucson; she having been journeying to the latter town, when captured by the red torturers.

She felt that Bill was safe and that it would only embarrass him were she to seek him in Nugget Notch, for the purpose of thanking him. Some day she hoped to have that opportunity.

Agreeable to her resolution, the Navajo maiden went back to the gorge, secured a mustang and equipments; then rode down the range, and passing through the Notch without being observed. During her passage through the town, she rode so near one cabin as to see distinctly the face of Buckland Bradley, the reputed brother of her rescuer.

She hoped that Bill was safe in the same cabin, but she dared not seek to know if such was really the case.

CHAPTER V.

THE PRINCE OF PAN-OUT.

BILL BRADLEY, when he had set out on his stroll up the range, which had resulted in the rescue of Nonita from the Apaches, had not seen his brother since early morning; consequently the latter knew nothing of where Bill had gone. The night stage brought to Buck a letter, which we give:—

"TOMBSTONE, ARIZONA.

"PARD BUCK:—

"The party has been in town, and is keen on the hunt. She slid out, or soon will, to Tucson; at least, so I heard yesterday. She will fetch up at Nugget Notch without any plotting to get her there. She's gliding right into the trap. I'm getting the boys together, and we'll hunt a hole near the Notch, for there'll be a show to rake in loads of dust there soon.

"As she's getting close to your nest, she'll bear watching. She's no slouch, and may get a tough trailer after you, who'll balk your plans; and that will also touch the pouch of

"Yours truly,

"CAPTAIN H—P.

"P. S.—D—a D—o will work with us. That's settled."

When Buckland Bradley had perused this epistle, he sprang to his feet, with a fiendish laugh as he hissed:

"I've got the boy, and broken his spirit, and demoralized him generally with drink. Now, his sister seeks him, as I was confident she would. They must both die, but they shall suffer torments first!"

At once, the dark-browed villain prepared himself for a trip to Tucson, for he was determined to be there when the party mentioned in the letter arrived. It was while thus making ready, that he was seen by one who was destined to do much toward thwarting his plots—none other than Nonita, the Navajo squaw, who was then stealthily passing through the town, on her way to Tucson.

Buck left an ample supply of funds, where Bill could easily find the same, to furnish him

with liquor. He then started, having a fleet horse, and a hardy one at that.

It was on the evening of the third day after his departure from Nugget Notch, that he entered Tucson, in a way that showed plainly he did not care to be recognized.

He went to a house of entertainment frequented but little by Americans, and kept by a Mexican. There he had his horse cared for, and retired to rest; satisfied he could accomplish nothing he had in view until the following day.

But we have business at some little distance from that part of the town which Buck Bradley chose as his head-quarters. It is where the stage halted, at about the same time that Buck arrived.

One of the passengers was a lady, attired in sober black; a long crape veil completely covering her face.

Entering the hotel, she requested a room at once, and was immediately accommodated. She was young, probably not more than nineteen, of fine form, and with a perfectly lovely face; notwithstanding marks of care and grief, that were plainly to be detected.

Altogether she was one to command the respect and sympathy of even the roughest of humanity; and it was among such, to a certainty, that she was traveling. It could be seen, however, that she was one of strong will, and her energetic movements, even when occupied in such trivial matters as her toilet, proved that she was no laggard at anything.

Sitting down, she opened a small hand-bag, and took from it a slip of paper, which she glanced at, and then placed it in her pocket.

Upon it was written, as follows:

"PROFESSOR P. PEAPOD, Tucson, Arizona:

"The above is your man, if you are so fortunate as to find him in town.

"L. I. JONES.

"Tombstone."

Almost immediately a tap at the door was followed by a Mexican, bringing in the lady's supper. He placed the tray upon the table, without a word, but bowed politely.

"Do you know a man called Peapod?" she inquired of the Greaser.

"Si, senorita!"

"Is he in town?"

"Si, senorita!"

"Will you please tell him that a lady wishes to see him on important business, and bring him to me this evening, if possible?"

As she spoke, she handed him a dollar.

"Bueno!" he returned, with a low bow, and a courtly gesture. "Senor Peapod shall be here. Miguel will guide him to the senorita."

The servant withdrew, and the young lady took from her sachel a package of letters. These were all addressed to Miss Meta Montrose. This was the fair traveler's name.

For the present, we will leave her, while we make mention of matters connected with her arrival at the hotel.

When the stage rattled up, there was a beautiful Indian girl, fancifully attired, standing upon the veranda, and screened from the gaze of those on the street by a thick network of vines.

This was Nonita, the Navajo.

She had reached the town about the same time as had Buck Bradley, although she had come a more roundabout way.

Why she had been in such haste, she could not have explained to herself.

Some unaccountable influence seemed to draw her at speed to Tucson—something that seemed to be in no way connected with her visit in the first place, which had been that she might hear from her tribe through an army officer, who was to reach the town about that time, from the Navajo reservation. It was to ascertain if this officer had arrived that Nonita sought the hotel, and watched the passengers as they alighted.

The young squaw took particular notice of the lady in black, even glancing in at the parlor window while the latter stood there, when she met with a great surprise.

Before the clerk came in, the lady had thrown her veil aside for a moment, and Nonita caught a clear view of her face. But the stranger saw her not, and soon passed up to her room.

The Navajo maiden was greatly bewildered. But soon her face flushed, and her eyes brightened, for a familiar voice sounded in her ear:

"Give us your paw, my Pink of Perfection! 'Pon honor, I'm powerful pleased to place my peepers upon your phiz!"

Nonita turned to meet the man who thus addressed her. She caught his extended hand in both her own, first glancing around to see if there were any witnesses to their meeting. A partly suppressed ejaculation escaped her, while the flush faded from the beautiful Navajo's face, as she whispered:

"Look, Prince! Do you know that man?"

"I perceive nothing particularly familiar in his physiognomy. Why?"

The Indian maiden seemed greatly excited, and retaining her grasp upon the hand of her friend, drew him aside, bidding him in a whisper to follow her. It was now dusk, and forms were indistinct, especially in the shadow of the hotel, along which Nonita passed, following a narrow street leading south from the plaza.

For some distance the pair walked, the man keeping in the rear, while the girl led the way into a small *jacal*, the shanty of the lower order of Mexicans.

Shutting the door, the young squaw lighted a candle, thus revealing the small room, which was the whole interior of the primitive dwelling, and was almost devoid of furnishings.

But we must now describe the man whom Nonita had so unexpectedly met, as he is to be one of the principal actors in our drama. He was a noted character, always having an abundance of ready money, being a lucky speculator in mining claims. He was, besides, a crack shot, brave as the bravest—indeed, fearless and reckless—and with such a free-hearted, joyous nature that he was universally liked and respected.

His real aim in life was to right wrongs, bring criminals to justice, and protect the weak against the strong, being especially known as a friend and helper to those who had met with misfortune or disgrace.

He had been known at first as Professor Pierce; but this became at last changed into a *sobriquet* which originated from his making the letter P do him more service than is usual. Indeed, this was the case to an amusing extent at times; and, although for no other object than fun in the first place, it soon became a habit and second nature.

Professor Pierce developed, in consequence, into Professor P. Peapod; and, in course of time, "Peapod, the Prince of Pan-Out," which town he called his home, although he was seldom to be found there. To Nonita he had long been the kindest and firmest of friends.

The professor was prince-like in bearing, build, and looks. He was more than six feet in height, well built, and muscular. His hair was fine, wavy, and long, and he was always attired in well-fitting and richly-embroidered buckskin, with a costly Monterey sombrero, heavy with silver work, fine spurred boots, and his horse and equipments in perfect keeping with his own attire.

So much by way of introduction to Peapod, who stood, sombrero in hand, in the thatched *jacal*, gazing in a somewhat puzzled and wondering manner at Nonita, the Navajo, as she placed the candle in a tin sconce that was affixed to the wall.

CHAPTER VI.

FOREWARNED AND FOREARMED.

SEATING herself, and motioning to Peapod to do the same, Nonita produced a small package, from which she drew several photographs.

Holding one of these before the face of her friend, she asked:

"Do you know him, Senor Peapod?"

"I perceive the photo of the pilgrim we peeped at in the prospective, from the porch of the hotel," was the reply.

"Look at this!" she said, showing another.

Peapod gave a start of pleasure and surprise.

"May I never pick pistols, or jerk up a prairie pirate again, if that ain't Bill Bradley! Where is the poor panned-out pilgrim? That other calls himself Buck Bradley, and pretends they are brothers, but they are not pards even."

"Buck is a pirate, and needs a lead pill through his pericardium—that is, if my perspicacity ain't particularly wrong. Bill is a square pilgrim, a little too fond of drink, but Buck will bear watching. But, how came you by those pictures, Nonita? What's up, anyway?"

Thus questioned, the Navajo maiden told Peapod of her interest in William Bradley, when the latter resided in Tombstone; that he had left there with his brother without bidding her farewell, and that when she next saw him she was a captive to six Apaches. She then detailed the particulars of Bill's brave and daring efforts to rescue her, and all the circumstances attending her escape.

She gave it as her belief that her rescuer had stolen down the range in his dazed condition to Nugget Notch. She also spoke of having seen Buck Bradley in his cabin as she rode through the burg; and yet, he was the very man they had both seen from the veranda of the hotel.

"Peculiar," said Peapod, after a pause; "but proceed, for I presume, judging from the pucker of your phiz, that you've got something else in pickle—more pepper-saucy than that photo you've got your pretty paw over. If you're playing three-card monte, show up the little joker!"

Nonita, in response, exposed the face of the last of the three photographs.

It was the picture of a beautiful girl—of Meta Montrose, the lady who had just arrived at the hotel on the stage from Tombstone.

The young squaw then explained that she had found the package at the scene of the fight between William Bradley and the Apaches.

Peapod glanced from the last picture to Nonita with a look that was not devoid of amusement, as he said:

"She pans out pretty as a pink. But proceed. Who is this poppy of Paradise?"

Nonita pointed to Bill Bradley's photograph. "He is a good man," she said. "He saved Nonita from the terrible Apaches. That man"

—pointing to the picture of Buck Bradley—"is bad. You think so. I know so. He is not Bill's brother. Why does he say he is, but to do Bill wrong?"

"That lady"—indicating the photograph of Meta Montrose—"is like Bill. But why is Buck Bradley here to-night? Is it because that lady came in the stage from Tombstone? What does my white brother say?"

No sooner had the Navajo squaw announced the fact that the original of the picture had just arrived, than Peapod sprung to his feet.

It was a very strange chain of occurrences. The capture of Nonita by the Apaches, her rescue by Bill Bradley, the finding of the photographs, Bill's disappearance, and then the singular purpose that had caused the Indian maiden to speed to Tucson in the shortest line possible.

All this was strange enough, but stranger still had it been that she had detected the faces of two of the pictures, and both by mere accident, after her arrival. This discovery was the more remarkable when the fact was considered that she had glanced in but one cabin window, as she passed through Nugget Notch.

All this had struck Peapod, as Nonita had explained the same. Indeed, he was astonished, and felt confident that there was something of great importance to Bill Bradley in this arrival of Buck on the same evening as this lady from Tombstone.

"Peril and perdition!" exclaimed Peapod, in excitement. "A little passing perplexity prevents a clear pan-out now. But we'll paddle round the pond, Nonita, and in time pounce on the pesky pike that's pirating after the gold-fish, or playing for something we haven't peeped at properly yet."

"Remain here; I'm going to pipe that pirate pilgrim; and see how he pans out. No harm shall come to Bill Bradley if we can prevent. Now I propel."

So saying, Peapod started off.

The Navajo maiden was too much excited to remain in the *jacal*. In a few moments, she stole out, leaving the light burning.

Professor Peapod hastened at once to the hotel, and passed along the veranda, making a halt in the shaded portion of the same, and scanning the faces which were within the scope of the hanging lamp over the entrance, to ascertain if Buck Bradley was one of the loungers. But that worthy was not to be seen.

Both Nonita and Peapod had noticed, when they had glanced through the vines, that Buck had his hat drawn low over his forehead, and that he appeared anxious to avoid observation. Not seeing the man he was in search of, Peapod decided to go into the bar-room, thinking his game might be there, but, as he reached the hall, the Mexican, who had attended upon Miss Montrose, approached, beckoning him into the parlor.

"Senor Peapod will come with Miguel. A senorita is in the *casa*, and wishes to see him. Come!"

The professor was more than astonished. He was perplexed, and so much so that he said not a word to the Greaser, but followed him up the stairs, and thence to the extreme end of the building; the latter explaining that the senorita had been assigned a room as far as was possible from the bar.

Reaching the apartment, the Mexican tapped on the door lightly.

A gentle voice bade them enter.

Miguel ushered our friend in, announcing him.

"Senor Peapod has come, senorita!"

Peapod stepped forward, doffing his sombrero, and making a courtly bow, which Meta acknowledged gracefully. She was evidently very agreeably surprised at seeing such a splendid specimen of a man, to be known by such a queer cognomen.

She motioned him to a chair, but he placed his hand upon the back of it, remaining standing until she had seated herself.

"My name is Meta Montrose," she began, in a somewhat embarrassed manner.

"And mine, Miss Montrose, is not that by which I am generally known here, but Pierce—Prentiss Pierce—and very much at Miss Montrose's service."

As Meta was about to reply, her visitor, making a gesture of caution, stole silently toward the open window, over which hung heavy curtains.

He knew that the roof of a shed reached to the window, and on that roof he had heard a suspicious sound.

Without making the slightest noise, Peapod parted the curtains slightly, and glanced out. But he could detect nothing. Then stooping low, he discovered what he believed to be the outlines of a human form, crouching upon the roof near the window.

Without an instant's hesitation, Peapod jerked aside the curtains, and sprang out headlong upon the spy. Meta Montrose heard a fearful oath, and then the sound of two men fighting fiercely, as both rolled over and over, down the roof, and off the same to the ground.

She rushed forward and leaned out, in great apprehension, wonder, and terror. The next

she heard were the sounds made by some one running rapidly away.

What could it all mean?

It had the appearance of being a well-formed plan of Peapod to frighten her.

Yet this could not be.

He had never seen her before that night, and could not know her motives in sending for him. Could it have been a female who was upon the shed, acting the spy—a jealous female, in love with Peapod?

This seemed hardly more reasonable.

Such a man as the professor had been represented to be, would not thus have sprung out, and attacked a woman in such a desperate manner.

Meta was much alarmed, and she would be in an agonized state of mind until she had been assured that no one had been injured. She had good cause to feel thus, yet she thought not of leaving her apartment; appearing confident that Prentiss Pierce would return, notwithstanding the sounds she had heard seemed to imply that either he or the person who had been upon the roof had been injured if not killed.

Not for a moment did Meta dream that the spy was in any way anxious to know aught in regard to that which she had intended communicating to Peapod.

She believed that a great mistake had been made somehow, by somebody; and she longed to know all, especially what had caused a cry which she felt confident was that of a female.

So excited had this undreamed-of occurrence caused Meta Montrose to become, that she paced the apartment back and forth, stopping at times to listen intently.

For some time all was silent.

Then, to her great relief, she heard heavy footsteps.

There was a tap at the door.

She darted forward, and opened it, when Peapod, smiling and bowing, and with the most collected mien in the world, stood before her.

"Pardon me, Miss Montrose," he said, "for precipitating, or projecting my person from your presence, without preparing you for such a performance. It was an improper exit, but I had a particular purpose. I pounced upon a prowling pirate."

Meta, notwithstanding her anxious and perplexed state of mind, was forced to laugh outright at the professor's characteristic manner of expressing himself.

He now closed the door, walked to the window shutting that also, and continued:

"Pardon, again, my presumption, Miss Montrose; but, if our interview is to be of a private nature, we must proceed toward that point. There is a pusillanimous personage propelling himself around; wishes to pry into your private affairs."

"But for alarming you, I should have pulled a pistol on him, and piled him on the plaza."

Meta Montrose stared at Peapod in the utmost bewilderment and astonishment. She was unable to decide whether he was in fun or in sober earnest.

CHAPTER VII.

SPYING UPON THE SPY.

As a matter of course, Nonita had not been mistaken in the person whom she had pointed out to Peapod as Buck Bradley; although it was to her a startling discovery, from the fact that she had seen him through the window of his cabin at Nugget Notch, when she had passed through that burg three days previous.

She did not take into consideration the fact that she had come in anything but a direct course from the Notch, and that Buck had a remarkable horse for speed and endurance. But, more astounding still was finding him evidently in search of some one, and her discovering the original of one of the Bradley photographs in the lady who had just come in, on the stage from Tombstone.

That Buck was searching for this very lady, the Navajo maiden was fully satisfied. She knew that the lady must, in some manner, be connected with the Bradley brothers, or her picture would not have been kept by Bill with his own.

It was quite possible that Buck did not know of its being in his brother's possession. Indeed, the Indian girl was confident the two men were not brothers, and just as confident that Buck was at heart the bitter enemy of Bill.

She also felt assured that the young lady, who had arrived by the stage, was William Bradley's sister. That would, to some extent, explain Buck's presence. He must be her enemy also.

When Nonita had, at the first, opened and examined the small package, the pictures of the two young men had been no surprise to her; but the photograph of the maiden had given her a pang of jealousy, though for this there was no cause, as she had tried to remember she was only a squaw, and could not hope to gain the love of a white man.

But, upon studying the picture more closely, Nonita detected a likeness in the features to Bill Bradley, and she comforted herself with the

half belief that the fair face was that of Bill's sister.

After this, she resolved to do all in her power to aid and protect the lady who had just come to the hotel, and who seemed to be a stranger in a strange land.

That she would need friends and protection, Nonita was positive, when she recognized the face of Buck Bradley, in front of the hotel. Very much relieved and thankful had she been to meet Peapod, for she knew him to be the man of all men to ferret out a mystery; and a deep mystery, she felt sure, was in some way connected with the Bradleys.

She decided to relieve her mind by relating all she knew to Peapod; and this, as we have seen, she did.

When the young squaw had discovered Buck Bradley, the latter had been taking his walk, previous to rest after the fatigues of his journey, when, to his surprise, he heard passers-by mention the arrival of the stage. He had not looked for it until the following morning.

He now hastened to the hotel on the plaza, and cautiously made inquiries. Meeting with Miguel, the Mexican, he thrust a dollar into the hand of the Greaser, and asked if a lady had arrived from Tombstone.

"Si, senor," was the reply.

"Is she young and pretty?"

"Much beautiful, senor," answered the Mexican, who was determined to give as little information as possible, with a view of increasing the silver in his pocket.

"What is her name?" asked Buck, in a seemingly disinterested manner.

"The senorita does not want her name known," was the reply of Miguel, with a knowing leer.

"That makes no difference to us, you know"—passing another dollar. "Will you speak now?"

"Her name is Senorita Monteflora," whispered the Greaser, as he quickly pocketed the coin, with much satisfaction.

"Ah! So that is her name. I do not know her. She is not the person I expected."

With these words, Buck Bradley strode away, across the dark plaza.

Suddenly he halted, exclaiming:

"By Heavens! It is she, after all. That Greaser has got things mixed, as they always do. Montrose, Monteflora—that's it. Ha! ha! Pretty good. I believe I'll go back."

Miguel had not left his position. He was standing where Buck had left him.

Stepping up, the latter inquired of the Mexican what room had been assigned to Miss Monteflora.

"Way back up stairs, next to the shed, where no noise from bar-room wake her up," was the Greaser's reply.

"All right! I'll see you to-morrow."

Buck again turned away, but he went a very short distance in the direction of his own hotel. Circling round, he reached an alley leading west, and was soon passing the very *jacal* in which Peapod and Nonita were then examining the photographs. Had he known of this he would have played the spy upon them; thus enabling him to have ascertained that which shortly after appeared to him the most astounding mystery.

In short, he would have known that both the Navajo squaw and Peapod were on his track to defeat his villainy; their suspicions as to his true character and intentions having been increased through the discovery made by the Indian girl.

But this was not to be.

Buck slackened his speed upon nearing the vicinity of the hotel, approaching the rear yard of the same. When near the shed, the roof of which, he saw, to his satisfaction, extended up to the window-sill of the last room of the establishment, he made halt, screened from view by some bushes. For some time he gazed up at the window, through the curtains of which struggled a dim light.

He could see that the sash was raised, and that everything was favorable for his intended movements.

Slowly, and with great caution, he climbed to the top of the fence.

While he had been in the bushes, he had heard the footsteps of a man, passing along the street toward the plaza. This was Peapod, who had just left Nonita.

But Buck Bradley heard not the light, panther-like tread of the Navajo squaw, who followed close behind. She did not proceed far. Naturally she scanned the hotel, within which she knew was the strange maiden.

Suddenly she perceived a dark form upon the top of the fence, climbing upon the shed, and instantly her suspicions were aroused. Soon they became almost certainty. She believed it to be Buck Bradley, and that he was bent on no good. She noticed the open window.

Could that room be the same that was occupied by the fair stranger? If so, the villain's object was obvious.

He was about to act the spy, or it might be, steal into the chamber, and bear her away.

Nonita crouched low, and watched the slow movements of the miscreant; concluding that it would be best to allow him to proceed as far

as possible for him to do without bringing harm upon any one. She was now confident, not only that the strange lady was in that back chamber, but that Buck had ascertained the fact.

She regretted that Peapod had left.

Little did she imagine that he had been summoned, by this same fair stranger, to an interview.

She saw the dark form creep silently to the window, but keeping to one side of the same.

He soon gained the position he had aimed for. It was evident that he did not intend to enter the apartment.

This much relieved the young squaw.

At that moment, the boot of the spy made a slight sound upon the shingles. Nonita arose quickly; thinking this might have been heard by the occupant of the room, and that the latter would now advance and gaze out.

In that case, something must happen.

Again she looked upward.

The sound had been heard, for the curtains parted slowly, but the lurking spy remained motionless. Then came a strange and most startling transformation in the scene.

The curtains were dashed aside, flooding the roof with a light, not strong, but sufficient to reveal the figure of a man.

To her great astonishment, she recognized him as Peapod!

He hurled himself out from the window, directly upon the eavesdropper, and, both clinching, they rolled down the roof.

Nonita stood transfixed.

The next moment, the struggling pair fell from the shed, directly upon the fence, and, as they struck the same, they fell apart. One disappeared into the yard of the hotel, while the other rolled directly to the feet of the startled squaw.

The darkness prevented Nonita from recognizing him. At once he sprang up, with such force as to overthrow her as she bent over him, and sped down the street, in an opposite direction from the hotel.

Hastily the Navajo maiden gained a standing position, filled with rage, for she now knew that this man was the spy.

The next moment, a sound at the fence fell upon her ears; and, gazing up, she saw Peapod sitting upon it, breathing heavily.

"The pirate has propelled his putrid person from this precinct, without being particular about his punctiliousness. Did you perceive his phiz plainly, when I made my plunge to palsy him, my pretty Pink of perfection?"

"Perhaps he thinks I'll proceed to pursue, but I'm a played out pilgrim."

Great was the relief and joy of Nonita, to see the professor, hear his queer language, and know that he had not been seriously injured.

She held up her hands, which he caught, and then sprang down beside her.

"Peapod knew Nonita was here," she said; "how? It is too dark to see faces."

"I perceived the light play on your beads, my pretty, when I proceeded to pry into the private arrangements of that pirate rather prematurely I reckon, by parting the curtains, and taking a peep."

"It was too precipitant, but I'll pounce on him, and peel his pate, sometime in the prospective. Only just let me get my paws on his person. Do you know who it was, Nonita?"

"Nonita saw not his face, but the spirits whis-ered that he was Buck Bradley. Did Peapod know he was there? How came my white brother to be in that room, and who has he left there?"

"The Princess, from Tombstone, my Pretty Pink. She whose picture you had, and which I now have in my pocket. She wished to see me privately. Things are progressing. The finding of the photos was but the prologue to a plot, which may be profound, and require prodigious power to press prone into ponderosity, but we'll prevail, I predict."

"I go now to the Princess. Keep cool, don't be too previous, and depend upon Peapod. Don't put yourself in peril, my Pink!"

Away dashed the professor, on his return to offer his solicited service, or advice, as the case might be, to Meta Montrose, whom he had left so strangely and unceremoniously.

CHAPTER VIII.

COUNSEL AND COUNCIL.

NATURALLY Meta Montrose was in a very confused state of mind, being without friend or protector, in a strange place, and among a wild and peculiar people.

Peapod had discernment enough to see this, and he resolved to conduct himself in a manner as free from peculiarity as possible, for he felt every sympathy for the fair stranger. With this end in view, he seated himself, and proceeded at once to business.

"Miss Montrose," he said, in a softened voice, "you sent for me, having as I presume heard me recommended as one who is strictly honorable, and takes pleasure in righting wrongs and assisting the weak and unfortunate. You must excuse my recent dash from your presence. It would be only natural for you to consider me insane."

"There was a man, who had crawled upon the roof of the shed, close to your window, with the evident intention of entering this apartment. What, think you, could have been his object?"

For a moment or two, Meta did not, and could not answer Peapod, his eyes being fixed searchingly upon her face; and she could not fail to see the respectful admiration, sincere pity, and desire to aid and befriend her, expressed therein.

"Mr. Pierce," she at length said, in a hesitating manner, "I am greatly confused and perplexed; more so from having wronged you in thought, than aught else. But, I know you will forgive me. You cannot know the weight that is upon my mind, but you can appreciate the fact that I am alone, and among strangers."

"Please say no more in that strain," pleaded Peapod, as she hesitated. "We shall know each other better soon, but you will only perplex me if you go on in that way. But, I asked you a question."

"And I will answer it," said the lady. "I do not understand the occurrence in the least. I have just arrived in this town, and am not aware that there is a person in it who knows me; much less one who would spy upon my movements, or seek to know what my object is in coming here."

"Besides, who could know that I was the occupant of this room, except the proprietor of the hotel, and the Mexican who conducted me to it—the same man, by the way, who gave you my message? It is perfectly absurd to advance the idea of any one here wishing to know my business and intentions, to the extent of climbing up to my window and listening."

"It may seem so to you now, Miss Montrose," returned her visitor; "but I do not believe you will entertain that opinion presently."

"I fail to understand your meaning, Mr. Pierce. I am more than puzzled. I am completely mystified."

"And you will be more so, before we part," said the professor. "I presume, Miss Montrose, you would be not a little astonished if I told you that I was on my way to seek an interview with you, when I was accosted by the Mexican, and told that you wished to see me."

"But such was the case, and I have still more surprising revelations to make to you."

Meta gazed at him in bewilderment.

This was increased tenfold when he passed her the photograph of Buckland Bradley.

"That, Miss Montrose," he said, "is the picture of the man who crawled up to your window a few minutes ago. You will now believe, no doubt, that there is a man in Tucson who knows you, and is sufficiently anxious to know your purpose in coming here to play the part of a spy."

Meta turned pale as death the moment she recognized the photograph. Indeed, she was so dumfounded at the assertions of Peapod, as to be speechless.

She sat, holding the picture in her trembling hand, her eyes fixed upon it with an expression of mingled hate and aversion. Peapod, too, remained silent regarding the beautiful girl, until at last recovering herself, she spoke:

"Tell me, Mr. Pierce, where did you obtain this picture, and the information regarding me which your words imply? I do not understand why you were seeking me, or in what manner you could have known of my arrival."

"This photograph," said Peapod, passing another, "will explain partly how I came to know you were in this place."

Meta Montrose looked at him as if she thought him a magician.

But there was more to come.

"If I mistake not," he continued, pointing to the picture of William Bradley, "that is the man you are seeking; and I, also, believe him to be your brother."

He stopped suddenly, for the lady no longer looked at the photograph. She arose to her feet and tottered forward, gasping for breath. The professor sprang up and caught her, or she would have fallen. Slowly she recovered, and sinking into a chair, exclaimed:

"I came very near fainting, and no wonder. I would thank you, Prentiss Pierce; but, let me think—let me compose myself."

Peapod again seated himself mechanically, as if his thoughts were deep, as if some strange revelation had been imparted to him.

He remained thus but a short time.

The silence was strange and most impressive, as the two, so strangely brought together, thus waited for each other. At length, Peapod felt that it was his duty to explain further.

"Miss Montrose," he began, "allow me to relieve your mind as much as it is possible for me to do at this time. My story is a simple one, but still strange in many respects. You may have heard the cry of a female, after I sprang out of the window. She is a Navajo squaw, and to her you owe much, as I will prove."

"Four days ago, she was taken captive by hostile Apaches, and was rescued by William Bradley, at the risk of his life; he slaying, with her aid, the entire party, six in number. He was slightly wounded, and the Indian girl went

to a spring to procure some water. When she returned, he had vanished.

"Nonita believing that, on recovering consciousness, he rushed into the pines, on his way to his home in Nugget Notch. She found the photos I have shown you, on the ground where Bradley and one of the Apaches had struggled desperately for life. She kept them, and examined them.

"She then appropriated a mustang, which had belonged to one of the war-party, and galloped down the range in the night. But she saw, in one of the cabins at the Notch, as she passed, the face of Buck Bradley, who passes for the brother of her rescuer.

"She came directly here, being three days on the trail; and, while she stood on the veranda of this hotel, you arrived in the stage. She saw your face, through the window, when you entered the parlor; and you may imagine her surprise, for she had your picture also.

"I met Nonita soon after, and was much pleased to do so, for we have known each other long. But she called my attention to a man on the plaza, near by. This was Buck Bradley, whom she had seen in his cabin, as she passed through Nugget Notch.

"The young squaw observed that he seemed to be seeking some one, and also that he evidently sought to avoid recognition. Together, we came to the conclusion that he was aware of your coming, and had some villainous purpose in view in riding here in such haste.

"From the resemblance between William Bradley's picture and your own, we decided that you were his sister, and were in search of him. We, therefore, determined to aid you. Duckland Bradley pretends to be William's brother, but he is evidently no relation whatever. Duck is a villain of the deepest dye—that no one doubts.

"He has some dastardly plot in view, but everything seems to have been providentially arranged thus far. The rescue of Nonita, the finding of the photographs, the recognizing of yourself by the Indian girl, as the original of one of the pictures, her previous recognition of Buck Bradley at Nugget Notch, and then his being discovered here.

"Then, there is the fact that I decided to seek an interview with you; while, at the same time, you had already requested the Mexican to tell me you wished to see me. This, with my discovery of the spy, and last, but not least, the realization, which is, I hope, mutual, that each one of us has met a friend who can be depended upon.

"Miss Montrose, a just God has guided Nonita to this point—I am firmly convinced of that. What your object here is I believe I know as well as if I had heard your story. Yet, there is another strange fact to relate, which slipped my mind.

"I left this Navajo squaw at a hut a short distance from this hotel, and bade her remain there, it being my intention to ascertain if Buck Bradley was lurking about the plaza or the hotel. Nonita, however, was impelled to disregard my wishes, and she left the cabin, coming here in time to discover Buck Bradley climbing up the shed to your window.

"She knew nothing of your being in this room, and of course had not the remotest idea that I was to be here. Thus, you see that, had I not caught sight of the lurking miscreant, Nonita would have given the alarm when he stole down from his perch.

"It certainly does appear, all through, that your guardian angel has been influencing us, strangers even to your name, toward protecting you."

CHAPTER IX.

MERLE, THE MISSING.

As Peapod ended his story he saw that Meta was weeping, and he remained silent. At length, controlling herself, she said, in a voice that was still trembling:

"Prentiss Pierce, I will not thank you, for words are too meaningless and tame to express what I really feel. I sent for you to confide in you, and to endeavor to persuade you to assist me. I wished to engage your help in my search for one long lost, and here you are seeking me to offer that very service.

"More than that, you at once inform me where he is to be found, and you speak of him as William Bradley. Yes, you are right in your surmises. The picture you have shown me is that of Merle Montrose, my brother!

"As you have also decided, the original of this other photograph, who, you say, pretends to be Merle's brother, is no relation whatever, but a most designing villain, one whose only object is to wrong Merle and myself.

"You have told me a strange story. I will now relate mine. But, I do wish you would find this brave Indian girl and bring her to me. I would thank her also."

"I'll produce her with pleasure," said Peapod, starting out forthwith.

Meta Montrose smiled faintly. She was happier than she had been for many long months. Strange to say, although she must have decided from the words and manner of the professor that

Buck Bradley, as he called himself, was a man to be feared, yet she entertained no feelings of apprehension on his account. She deemed him a coward and unworthy of consideration.

A slight reasoning on Meta's part would have caused her to decide that the dastardly plotter was far more to be feared than a brave man, or an open enemy.

Peapod had no difficulty in finding Nonita, who reported that she had not seen Buck Bradley, although she had been on the watch. The young squaw was greatly pleased when informed that Miss Montrose wished to see her.

She at once accompanied Peapod, and soon the pair entered the presence of the maiden, in whose life history they had become so unexpectedly connected. The latter received the Navajo maiden with welcoming smiles.

"I am glad to see you, Nonita," she said, "because you have known and have been a friend to my brother, and have, but a short time since, seen and conversed with him. But his name is not William Bradley—it is Merle Montrose."

"Nonita is glad to hold the hand of Meta, the sister of Bill. But he is Merle—Merle is better than Bill."

The beautiful Indian maiden was educated far above many American girls of the middle classes, was gentle and lady-like, and in her costume displayed great taste, there being nothing loud or flashy in her attire, although countless beads of various colors and curious ornaments in silver glittered in the candle-light.

It was evident to Peapod that Meta had been very agreeably surprised at the beauty, grace, and winning appearance of the young squaw. But he feared that the two females would launch out into a sea of conversation, which would delay the communication Miss Montrose had to make.

"Now," he began, "Miss Meta, and you, Nonita, if you will be seated, we will hear the true state of things at once; for I'd like to promenade the precinct properly, and find out if that prowling pirate has propelled himself prairie-ward, or thought it prudent to parade the plaza to-morrow, as a pattern of propriety and perfection. Proceed to prattle, if you please, Miss Montrose."

The young lady glanced at her eccentric friend, but he seemed unconscious of having changed his style of speaking; so, with a smile, she seated herself beside Nonita.

"Please bear with me, my friend," said Meta; "for it is not a pleasant task for me to relate what it is necessary I should. I will do the best I can, and be as brief as possible, giving a mere outline of our family history."

"My brother and myself were born on the plantation of my father, in Eastern Texas, at what point it is not necessary for me to say. A brother of my father lived across the line in Louisiana. Both were quite wealthy. My mother died some years since, and it was a terrible loss to my brother and myself. Merle was always very easily influenced by almost any one, though not to the extent of committing any act that was criminal or dishonorable.

"We seldom visited our Louisiana uncle, who was a widower, with one daughter; the latter resembling me very much. But I must speak of that portion of my uncle's history that bears upon my own. He had, some years ago, married a widow, who had one son.

"No one knew anything of their antecedents, and both proved to be everything that was vile and base. The woman held great influence over her husband. She and her rascally son contrived to sell nearly everything on the plantation; drugging my uncle's liquor, and keeping him in a stupefied condition continually. Then they formed a plot of the most fearful kind.

"They poisoned the daughter, and made her father believe he had done it by given her the wrong medicine, she having been ill at the time. Her death drove my poor uncle nearly, if not quite insane; and he was easily persuaded by the plotters, to sell out, and go further west. There he grew worse, and a man was hired to take him into the wilds, and lose him.

"All this, we found out later. We, at home, knew nothing of any of these matters until fully a year after all had occurred. That terrible woman and her son thus gained considerable wealth. They went to New Orleans, and managed, by display, to get into good society. She was a practiced adventuress. She had found out, from my uncle, all about our affairs; and it so happened that my father had accumulated a large amount of gold, which he was hoarding for Merle and myself. Father had no confidence in banks, at that time.

"Now comes the strangest part of my story. This vile creature and her son, after obtaining letters from some of the leading people of the Crescent City, came to the vicinity of our home, and rented a small plantation. The young man formed the acquaintance of my brother; and, in a little time, Merle was completely under his influence. The woman called herself Madame Clare La Croix, and her son was known as Louis La Croix.

"The madame soon began to carry out her second scheme. This was to win my father, as her husband. Not satisfied with ruining his

brother's family, she resolved to ruin him and his also.

"She fascinated him, and he fell an easy victim; notwithstanding my constant pleading with him, for I distrusted her and her son from the first. It was useless.

"They were married, and every misery followed. Merle was led into gambling and drinking. But, in one thing, the madame could not succeed. My father refused to say where his gold was stored. From that time our home became perfectly terrible. I was glad to accept an invitation to visit a relative in Houston. Little did I dream of what would occur in my absence.

"That perfidious pair tortured my poor father with the lash, again and again, to force him to give up his money; but they were unsuccessful. Previous to this, Louis had drugged Merle, and afterward made him believe that, while intoxicated, he had forged our father's name for a large amount; that this had been discovered, and he must fly.

"Louis took him to Arkansas, and there left him in a retired place, promising to return to him. After torturing my poor father once more, the miscreants found they had gone too far. They found him, the next morning, dead! He had died alone, in his own garret—whipped to death, like a slave!

"Thoroughly frightened, the wretches decided to bury the corpse, and then give out that Mr. Montrose had gone away to purchase cattle. But, it so happened, that the madame had mixed a bottle of poison, intending to administer it to her husband, should she find it necessary; and, while herself intoxicated, she drank sufficient of it, by mistake, to cause her death.

"In her agonies, her shrieks aroused the negroes, some of whom her for the neighbors and a physician. It was then, that in her remorse, she confessed everything. Louis had fled, it was believed, to seek my uncle, Maurice Montrose, in Arizona, and force him to reveal what he knew in regard to my father's gold.

"My friends, you may guess the remainder. I have, I trust, through you, found my brother. You can understand how I must hate Louis La Croix, whom you have known as Buck Bradley. You have not been mistaken in your estimate of him. I could not have borne what I have, had I not felt confident that right and justice would yet triumph."

It was a terrible task to Meta to relate all this, as both her listeners realized; and it required all her strength of will to control herself to the end. Then she broke down completely.

Nonita gathered the sobbing girl in her arms, stroking her hair, and rocking the trembling form back and forth.

Prentiss Pierce arose from his chair, and turned his face upward, while his lips kept moving. He was vowing silently to avenge, as far as was possible, the wrongs of Meta Montrose, and save her brother.

CHAPTER X.

FOR RESCUE AND REVENGE.

AFTER a few minutes had elapsed, the Indian girl drew Meta from her chair and laid her on a lounge, seating herself by her.

Peapod said not a word.

His hands were clasped behind his head, and that bowed forward, in the position, and with the appearance of deep thought.

And good reason had he for it.

Much he regretted the escape of Buck Bradley, for he foresaw great trouble ahead for Meta and Merle. Certainly, he decided, Merle must have been greatly demoralized mentally, and be naturally weak-minded, to allow his reputed brother to gain such influence over him, even to the extent of keeping him from seeking to reunite himself with his own sister.

But Peapod reasoned that probably Merle had been made to believe that Meta, as well as their father, was dead.

Be that as it may, the young man must be rescued; and Peapod resolved to effect this.

Then the idea came into the professor's mind, that Buck would not bother himself about Merle, unless he had good reason to believe that the uncle of the young man and Meta still lived, and through him he could yet find out what he so much wished in regard to the buried treasure in Eastern Texas. It would, therefore, be fully as charitable a deed to restore the terribly wronged Maurice Montrose to sense and society, as to bring together the long separated brother and sister.

It was truly awful to think what the present condition of the poor man might be.

Peapod had never been so wrought up in his life. He had always felt sure that Buck Bradley was a villain, but he had never dreamed that he was capable of the crimes he had really committed. But he must act, and at once.

He must now hasten to Nugget Notch, find Merle, conduct him to Meta, and then set about ascertaining all that he could of Maurice Montrose, if still living, and his whereabouts. Then it suddenly occurred to him that perhaps Buck Bradley had hastened back to Nugget Notch for the purpose of taking Merle away; for he would now know that Meta was in search of him.

But how had Buck discovered that Miss Montrose was in Tombstone? The miscreant must have confederates there, and no doubt was in league with outlaws. If so, then indeed there were dangers in Meta's path, and Peapod could not but congratulate himself on being in a position to advise and aid her.

He was aware that the rich "finds" around the Notch had drawn and would continue to draw a large number of the most dangerous outlaws and adventurers from other less favored points. As he had never been in Nugget Notch, he now resolved to take the town by storm, and work up his case as he had many others, in such a manner as to give no one any cause to suspect his object.

One thing still puzzled him.

This was the statement of Nonita, in connection with the disappearance of Bill Bradley. Peapod did not think it probable that the young man could have recovered so quickly; and, even had he done so, he would not have been likely to leave the scene of the fight so suddenly. He certainly would have remembered Nonita, and looked around for her.

Peapod felt positive that there had been a witness to the fight, and one who had borne Merle away while he lay senseless, and the Indian girl was absent at the spring.

He was not long in forming his conclusions.

"Miss Meta," he then said, in a sympathetic tone; "your story of the fearful wrongs which you and your family have suffered, and the infamous crimes which have been committed in connection with them, have strengthened my resolve to do all that lies in my power for you. It is my first work now, to reunite you and your brother, and to find your unfortunate uncle, who, I cannot but think still lives. Indeed, I am confident of it.

"Were it not so, Buck Bradley, as I must still call him, would not have any object in keeping your brother with him; or of securing you as his captive, which, I am sure, is his intention. It is only in that way that he can hope to find out where your father's money is to be found.

"This is the scheme, I feel very sure, that Buck has in view; but we will thwart him yet. I know, however, that this will be no easy matter; for, without doubt, the dastard has confederates, as well as money with which he can bribe the desperate men of the mines to do his bidding.

"You have been at a disadvantage all along, and you know not that your brother was living under an assumed name; besides, you have never thought of searching for two men who traveled in company. I fear that this La Croix, after to-night's experience, has hastened back to the Notch, and will at once proceed to work things fine, and bring his plot to an immediate climax.

"If he knows of the whereabouts of your uncle, the way is clear; for he will secure him, capture yourself if possible, and then, with Merle, have the game in his own hands. You will, therefore, see the necessity for my setting out at once for Nugget Notch."

"You overwhelm me with kindness, Mr. Pierce," said the young girl; "and you have explained matters as clearly and concisely as if you had had the case in your hands for months. I shall feel confident that you will do wonders; if the stumbling-blocks, we have cause to fear from Louis La Croix, are not placed in your way.

"However much I may fear that miscreant, the loathing I feel for him is so intense that I believe that I would not hesitate to shoot him down, any more than I would at destroying a poisonous snake. I do not apprehend any danger, personally, from him, and am ready to brave anything; but I feel great reluctance in asking, or accepting, your services in this matter.

"You see, should you meet with any accident, or be caused any suffering on my account, I could never forgive myself."

"Please bear in mind, Miss Meta, that I consider it the highest honor, and that it gives me the greatest pleasure, to serve you. So there let the matter rest."

"I would thank you, Mr. Pierce, could I in any way fittingly express my thanks. Far less, even, is it in my power to recompense you for your great kindness."

"You greatly underestimate your power, my dear young lady. One smile from you would nerve any one worthy the name of man, to the most daring deeds; and another would pay him with compound interest, for having done them. Since that fully satisfies me, you certainly ought not to complain."

Meta colored at these words of Peapod, and her eyes fell; but, by an effort, she again spoke, changing the subject.

"What length of time do you give me, Mr. Pierce, to prepare for the journey?"

"To what journey do you refer?"

"Why, to Nugget Notch, of course."

"I would not have you go there, Miss Montrose. It is a thoroughly rough place. There is not a female in the town, I am told; and even my brave Nonita would think twice before entering it. You know she passed through that delectable burg in the night; and, although

anxious in regard to your brother, did not seek to make sure that he had reached it in safety."

"Nonita will go to Nugget Notch with Peapod," put in the young squaw, in a determined voice and manner.

"That is all right then. When you say you'll do a thing, Nonita, it is as good as done. The very roughest among them will respect the 'Pink of Perfection.' That is my pet name for Nonita, Miss Montrose.

"But, as to you—well, I pass. The mere thought of a lady like you entering that town makes me shudder; and it takes considerable to give me a frigid feeling.

"However, we have spent time enough in talk. You will remain in this hotel until I either come or send for you. You need fear no more from Buck Bradley."

Little did the occupants of that apartment think that the individual spoken of by Peapod that very minute crept up to the door, and caught the last few words that were uttered.

They caused his swarthy and villainous face to assume an expression of the most fiendish glee, and an exultant light to gleam in his snaky and treacherous eyes.

Then he hastily stole away in the darkness; repeating, in a hissing whisper:

"Just so. Remain here until I come, or send for you. 'Send for you' is good. Ha! ha! Excellent! You need fear no more from Buck Bradley—so that's it? Oh, of course not. Ha! ha!"

"You, Miss Montrose, and Nonita had better occupy these apartments to-night. You need sleep, both of you," said Pierce. "My poor horse must have rest and food. We can get ready for a start in the morning. I'll call, but not very early. *Buenos noches, senoritas!*"

And Peapod turned to leave.

Meta went after him and caught his hand.

"Good-night," she said, "and may Heaven bless you."

Nonita made a parting salutation with her hand.

"Heaven's choicest blessings light upon you, Meta Montrose!" exclaimed Prentiss Pierce. "May your future be as bright as your past has been dark, and may it be my good fortune to help in making it so!"

So saying, he vanished in the darkness of the corridor.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WILD MAN OF THE MOUNTAINS.

WE will now return to Merle Montrose and his mysterious disappearance.

Had Nonita but paused to notice the burden carried by her captor, she would have recognized her brave rescuer; but this was not to be, and it was best that it was not so. For, had she done so, she would not then have hastened as she did to Tucson and been instrumental in accomplishing what she did.

In such event, Meta would have easily fallen into the hands and power of Buck Bradley. Hence, it will be seen upon what little circumstances great events and important situations in our lives frequently hang. Nonita would have failed, doubtless, had she sought to rescue Merle, and would have been captured once more. Thus the whole course of events would have been changed.

It was a kind Providence, therefore, that directed the Navajo squaw, preventing her from discovering Bill Bradley in the arms of the wild man, and no less fortunate for the captive himself.

It would, however, have been difficult to convince him of that fact after he regained consciousness and found himself in that wild mountain cavern—the home of the strange being, whom he had often seen at a distance, bounding from rock to rock up the side of the range.

After placing him upon a couch of skins, his strange captor hastened back through the passage into that one of the series of caverns in which he had left Nonita. As we already know, he found the apartment empty.

He caught up a torch, and rushed frantically around; searching every corner, and then to other chambers, but without success. He appeared to be very much grieved at the disappearance of the young squaw, and seemed to lose all interest in his other captive. He had, evidently, considered Nonita a great prize, one whom he could adopt and pet; and that, when she regained consciousness, she would be more contented to remain in the cave, when she saw there also the white youth whom he had seen fight so bravely in her defense. This was why he had sought Merle, and brought him to the cavern.

The Wild Man now seated himself upon a large stone, in the principal chamber, and bowed his head, his hands over his face; rocking back and forth, and moaning. For some time he remained thus. Then a deep groan sounded through the cavern, and he sprung to his feet, his eyes glaring wildly, while he seemed to claw the air.

Another deep groan was heard, and then the fierce look of the strange being changed; his face softened to a remarkable degree in its expression, and a satisfied smile actually transfigured his face with its kindly light.

When he had found Merle, he had not, in the semi-darkness outside the cave, seen the youth's face; and he had not, since then, approached sufficiently near to gain a view of his features. He had, upon entering the cave, been so eager to secrete his burden without the young squaw's knowledge, that he paid little attention to aught else.

He hesitated but a moment after the groaning was repeated, but caught up the first torch he saw; and, stealing along the passage, entered the cave-chamber in which he had placed the unconscious young man.

The Wild Man approached him with a stealthy step and cautious manner, his look expressing only curiosity. Placing the torch in a seam of the wall, he tenderly raised the form of Merle, with no apparent effort.

As he turned the unresisting sleeper over, and straightened himself up, the light of the torch shone directly down upon the pallid features. Then a more astonishing change than before came over the face of the Wild Man.

The change was startling. The features of the cave-dweller became stamped with horror, and he turned the hue of death. Had he been a sane being, and of a nervous and superstitious nature, and had been confronted by a specter of the most frightful aspect, he could not have expressed stronger emotions.

Thus he stood, for a full minute, as if chained to the spot; when, slowly the eyes of Merle Montrose opened, and became fixed with a meaningless stare upon the face of the Wild Man of the Mogollons.

This broke the awful spell upon the latter. His arms flew upward, the palms of his hands being pressed to his brow, convulsively. Then, a most unearthly shriek shot from the bluish lips, and he fell in a heap, as if every muscle had been instantaneously bereft of all power, and his nerves as well!

That wild cry rung and echoed through the passages and caverns in a most terrific manner, and as if a hundred fiends had given vent to their demon glee, so greatly did the reverberation change the original sound.

It was not strange that Merle, although his brain was benumbed and dazed by concussion of bullet, and against boulder, should be startled and horrified. The unearthly apparition beside his couch, the shriek that tore through his sensitive brain like a ragged dart of steel, and the sudden vanishing of that dread form—all this, together with the gloomy shades, the rough walls of stone, and the smoky flaring torch, was certainly sufficient to have caused even a naturally cool and strong-nerved man, in perfect health, to believe that he had been transported, when asleep, to the very depths of Tartarus.

Poor Merle! His terrible fight with the Apaches had been enough in itself to weaken and demoralize him, when we take into consideration the fact that his mind had been long affected by drink, and grief, and remorse, through the influence of the dastard La Croix, known as Buck Bradley.

An exile from his home, forced to leave that home through a belief that he had disgraced those whom he loved; and to know that his home was broken up, and his father and sister dead—all this was terrible. Little wonder was it, that he had sought to drown his despair and agony in drink; even though his great misery was increased tenfold, when purposely deprived of stimulants at times, by Buck, that he might gain greater power over him.

Merle Montrose started to a sitting posture, as the Wild Man sunk below the side of the couch; and his eyes were filled with wonder and horror, as he gazed around him.

As soon as he could, in the least, comprehend his own individuality, he instinctively thrust his hand into his side pocket, and drew out his flask, which, luckily for him, had not been broken, and still contained a small quantity of liquor. He quickly swallowed some, never in his life having felt the need of it more.

The whisky strengthened his nerves, and he soon assumed a more natural appearance, and gazed around him.

He then raised his hand to his head, where the Apache bullet had plowed through the scalp, and grazed his skull. He also felt the swelling that had been caused by his fall against the boulder.

He wished, by this, to prove to himself that the scenes through which he had so recently passed, were not distorted pictures of his imagination, but horrors that had actually happened.

Then he became more composed, and congratulated himself upon having escaped with life from the Indians; although unable to comprehend where he was, or by what means he came to be there.

His next thought was of Nonita.

He knew he would have been killed but for her having banished the terror which had first ruled her in the fight, and so bravely defended him.

Every incident of the conflict was vividly recalled by him, up to the time when he became unconscious. Much did he long to know what had become of the brave young Navajo squaw.

From this line of thought Merle returned to a consideration of the strange apparition that had stood beside his couch, and had given that fearful shriek. He leaned over and beheld a dark object upon the hard floor. Reaching for the torch, he brought the light to bear upon it.

Then Merle knew that it was the Wild Man of the Mogollon Mountains, of whom he had heard so much, and whom he had often seen when hunting, but at a distance.

It was more than probable, he concluded, that this strange cave-dweller had brought him to his mountain home.

But, if so, why had the Wild Man been so strangely affected, when he first opened his eyes and gazed at him?

This was another mystery.

The young man seemed to entertain no fears of personal injury from the hermit. Indeed, with a feeling of gratitude and sympathy, he crawled off the couch and placed his flask to the old man's lips.

Soon the latter gave signs of returning consciousness; later on, opening his eyes and observing the man who was playing the Good Samaritan. He then sprang forward and caught Merle in his arms.

Just the opposite were the emotions of the Wild Man now from those which had controlled him previously. In spite of the struggles of Merle Montrose to free himself, the strange recluse persisted in treating him like a long-lost child.

Most remarkable were the changes which came over the Wild Man, and as rapid as they were strange.

Merle knew not whether to be angry or frightened.

But he did know that he was as helpless as a babe in the strong arms of the Wild Man of the Mogollon Mountains.

CHAPTER XII.

HEARING FROM THE HARD-UPS.

WHEN Buck Bradley had been so summarily ejected from the shed-roof, he ran some distance and then halted to listen. Hearing no pursuer, he made a wide detour, returning to the plaza, but some distance from the hotel. He had not entertained the slightest suspicion of being interfered with.

When he had heard from Miguel of the arrival of a lady from Tombstone, and had satisfied himself that it must be Meta Montrose, he had at once ascertained the location of her room. He had not the remotest idea that she had a friend in the town; but, as the reader knows, he was soon made aware that there was a man in that apartment, whether Miss Montrose was there or not.

Neither did Buck know, so sudden and astounding had been the assault upon him, who the powerful stranger was who had launched himself out through the casement; but he did know that his assailant had a grip of iron, and that but for the fence having given way, he himself would have been in no enviable situation. He knew, too, that he had fallen at the feet of a female, but he knew not who she was.

Altogether, it had been a somewhat mysterious and perplexing affair; and, if the lady from Tombstone was the one he expected, matters must be investigated, even at greater risks than those he had encountered.

If Meta Montrose had a masculine friend, he must know who that friend was.

He must also ascertain who the female was who had screamed.

This time he stole to the corner of the hostelry at the point at which Peapod had stepped upon the veranda when he met Nonita.

It was now quite dark, and Buck entered through one of the windows, and, passing stealthily through the deserted parlor, gained the stairs, and was soon at the door of the apartment that had been pointed out to him. There he paused and listened.

He recognized the voice of Peapod, the man most feared by the "crooked" of that region, and he knew also the lady with whom he was conversing was Meta Montrose. There, too, was Nonita, the Navajo squaw, who had often infuriated him by her display of friendship for his pretended brother and victim.

How came she to be there?

Buck Bradley knew that Peapod interested himself in Meta, and would move heaven and earth, so to speak, to defeat his plans; and he could see, also, that the Indian maiden was just as anxious to assist the fair traveler, and that they all knew he had been the spy at the window.

He realized that he had very narrowly escaped a man who had no mercy for the lawless, and who gloried in exposing crime. But, how Peapod and Nonita had become acquainted with Meta Montrose, and why they took such an interest in her, was a mystery to him.

The last words spoken by Peapod gave the dastard spy an idea which caused him the most fiendish glee—so much so that he stole away, lest he should betray himself.

He little thought that Meta had related her sad history to her new ally; indeed, he hardly supposed her to be aware of so much, or even to

suspect that her uncle still lived. He felt positive that her one plan was to get her brother back to the States, and Buck was resolved that she should not accomplish it.

More than that, she herself, he vowed, should never return.

Now that he was forewarned of the dangers that threatened him, he would be forearmed to meet them.

He knew Peapod to be a most resolute and determined man, expert in arms, and that he had a peculiar manner, which made him very popular wherever he went. He also knew the Navajo maiden to be devoted to Bill, and that she would prove a merciless foe to himself.

Buck Bradley, while thus cogitating upon the changed face of affairs, which necessitated a complete change in his own plans, had made his way from the hotel without discovery, and thence very nearly to the place at which he had engaged lodgings, when he suddenly recollected that there was a letter for him in the mail that had come on from Tombstone that night, and that he might possibly be able to get it by explaining that he did not intend to go direct to his home, but was about to strike for a point a day's ride west of the Notch. At all events, it was important for him to have the letter now.

The hour was late, and they were about closing up. By showing a number of letters which he had with him, and stating the case, he convinced the official of his honesty and identity, and obtained the letter. It was not the one he had been expecting, but it was from the party he desired, most of any one, to hear from. We subjoin the epistle:

"TOMBSTONE, ARIZONA.

"PAID BUCK:—I write in haste. The old boy to pay here. The hearse up range 'exploded,' and three of the 'outsiders' were killed. Loaded with giant powder in place of 'dust.' We had a stampede, and two more of the boys ran into 'mustang snares,' and broke their necks.

"The rocks are too rough this way, and we start for—you know where—before this letter glides out of the burg. D—a D—o will help to run the racket. C—N H—P."

Buck Bradley read this missive by the light in the office before leaving, and it was all he could do to control himself. Hastily replacing it in the envelope, he strode out upon the plaza.

He was greatly excited. He had, as he believed, thrust the letter into his pocket, but instead, having at the time the others, by which he had proved his identity, in his hand, it had fallen to the ground.

This had been when he stepped from the post-office into the street.

It so happened that Peapod, having left his fair charges to their slumbers, came out from the hotel, upon the plaza; thinking he might possibly gain some information in regard to Buck Bradley. To his surprise, he caught a glimpse of a form that closely resembled him. It must be the villain himself, Peapod felt convinced.

Buck vanished in the darkness, and the professor hastened after, searching for some time, up and down streets, and in bar-rooms, but could not find his game.

On his way back, he stooped, and picked up an envelope, which lay in front of the post-office. It was the very letter, which Buck had been so rejoiced to receive and peruse. Peapod passed it into his pocket without examination, and then entered the office, calling out, as he did so—

"Pardon me; I'm a pilgrim without a parallel, when it comes to wiping out panthers, Piutes, or prairie pirates. I always parade from here to Pan-Out, perfectly panoplied, with the view of proving that I'm paramount. I'm not on the pathetic to-night and I'm not on the peep to prove—"

"Pause, I pray you, Professor Peculiar Peapod," said the postmaster, "and particularize more to the point, or you'll paralyze me. I thought you had, by this time retired, and given yourself, your friends, and your tongue a rest."

"I'm passive, my pious pard, but for all that you can't always predicate when I'll pounce into your palace. You happen to possess the power to relieve me from a pile of perplexity in regard to a particular party."

"In pedestrianizing across the plaza, I presume that I popped my peepers upon the precise person who, previous to my putting in an appearance, perambulated forth from this palatial post-office. He's now *perdu*, apparently."

"But, don't address me as Peapod. It is not particularly pleasant. Permit me to propose as less provokingly plain and prosy, Professor Pericarp. You perceive its appropriateness?"

"Perceive! Not much. Peapod fits you to a charm. Pericarp is too complicated. I see what you are up to. Carp is a fish, and Peri is a spirit which received the grand bounce from Paradise. That's what you're fishing for, eh? You are getting a little mixed, professor; so I'll humor you, and decide rather than lessen my good opinion of you, that it is *spirits*, and not a spirit, you are fishing for at this unusual hour."

"Well, we'll go and take a drink at once, and then you can ponder all you please on that pirate *perdu*. I'm not surprised. I did not like his looks myself. I presume, however, he's the man he represented himself to be. If he is not, he

must have killed him, and taken his letters and papers; and if so, I'll—"

"Hold on, pard! I can tell you his handle. It is Buckland Bradley."

"The very identical name; and he called for a letter here, that was addressed to him at Nugget Notch. He gave good reasons for wishing it delivered here, and satisfactory evidence that he was the right man. I hope it's all square, Peapod?"

"All right, I reckon. But we'll soon know, for I have the letter here."

"The deuce you have! Where?"

"In my pocket."

The professor then displayed the epistle which Buck had lost.

The postmaster stared at his eccentric friend, for some moments, in astonishment. He then burst out:

"Well, Peapod, I'll be hanged if you're not the most remarkable man in Arizona! How, in the mischief, came you by it? Have you dispatched that man in so short a time, and all for the purpose of getting hold of that letter?"

"Merely *perdu*, as I said, pard. He lost, and I found. We'll examine the document—in polite parlance, proceed to peruse the parchment. It may place that peregrinating pirate in a peculiarly perilous pickle."

As may be seen, the postmaster and the professor were on the most friendly and intimate terms.

They glanced over the epistle together, and both were astounded at its contents. It proved that Buck Bradley was connected with an organized band of outlaws—road-agents, or stage-robbers.

Peapod understood the letter thoroughly.

The bandits had, it appeared, "held up" a stage, which chanced to be freighted with tough fighters. These had shot three of the gang, and afterward captured two others and linged them. That was easily interpreted.

It being too dangerous in the vicinity of Tombstone for them, they were about migrating to a place well known to Buck Bradley, and which Peapod felt positive he was acquainted with also.

The bandits, he felt convinced, were the notorious "Hard-up Hellions," as they called themselves; consisting of both an American and a Mexican gang. The former was commanded by Captain Hold-up, and the Greasers by Donna Diablo, a Mexican woman, who was a veritable tigress.

Our two friends went direct to the hotel; the professor, since he had perused the letter, perceiving more clearly than ever that there was desperate and dangerous work ahead.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TORMENTS OF THE LOST.

MERLE MONTROSE found him in a peculiarly disagreeable position, to say the very least, when the Wild Man of the Mountains clasped him in his arms, and exhibited such signs of joy when he did so. To say that the young man was astonished at these extraordinary and unaccountable manifestations of joy, would be saying little; for, indeed, Merle was not only astounded, but greatly annoyed as well.

These feelings were changed for those of anger, and he struggled to free himself.

But the Wild Man only held him more closely, pleading with him to be still. Then a happy idea seemed to strike the strange being. He took up the flask of liquor, and putting the nozzle to Merle's mouth, gave him a drink, which the young man did not refuse; for his system called for stimulants quite often, on account of the unfortunate habit he had formed.

Indeed, there seemed, in his present state, to be a stronger craving for whisky than ever before; which was not to be wondered at, considering the anxiety he was in with reference to Nonita.

When he had drank from the flask, he became quiet, and gazed steadfastly at his keeper. The light from the torch was not strong or regular, but Merle noticed that the singular being had the appearance of being greatly pleased.

Little did the youth dream of the strange and important events, which were destined to occur through that crazed recluse having had strength sufficient to notice the effect of the liquor upon his patient.

Merle Montrose had, most certainly, sufficient food for thought.

He knew that it would be impossible for him to escape from the Wild Man, except by strategy; for the latter was a giant in strength, and very nearly so in stature. Yet Merle knew that he ought to be at Nugget Notch—that his disappearance would be looked upon as strange, and also that it was his duty to search for the Navajo maiden.

He could not bring himself to believe that Nonita had left him of her own free will.

She must have been carried away by force, and if so she must be rescued.

He cared little in regard to himself.

Buck would, doubtless, be relieved and pleased to find him absent.

He had no love for this adopted brother of his;

but still, the latter was his only associate—the only one who had known him in the past; at that home of which it drove him nearly distracted to entertain even a momentary thought. He had remained with him, indeed he had fallen into the habit of being almost wholly governed by Buck, who held his power over him through his pretended knowledge of Merle's crime and disgrace.

There were times when the unhappy young man doubted this. He could not believe that his father had put the officers of the law on his track, even if he had forged that father's name for a heavy amount, thus causing—so Buck alleged—his financial ruin. He knew more of the nature of his father's affairs than to believe that possible.

But much that he had been told he did give credence to. He was convinced that his father and sister were both of them dead, and that he was, in a great measure, responsible for their deaths.

There were times when the thought of all this nearly drove Merle insane, and he then reflected that nothing of this would have occurred but for Buck and his mother. Ever since they had become members of the Montrose household a curse seemed to have fallen upon it.

But Merle was weak enough to see, as he thought, one redeeming trait in the character of his companion. The latter had always adhered to him and shared his money with him. Had it not been for this, which weakened his suspicions greatly, he would have long since sought to break away from the villain altogether.

He still, however, thought him disinterested.

Buck could have no motive in remaining with him, and in his naturally surly way proving his friendship.

It was thus that Merle reasoned, for he had always considered the buried gold of his father to be a myth; and, even if he had believed it, he could not have understood why Buck continued to be friendly with him, unless it was out of pure sympathy.

The young man had no idea how his uncle lived, never having given the matter a thought. In fact, he had so long striven to drive all thought of the past from his mind that he had to a certain extent succeeded, that is, up to the time of his fight with the Apaches.

But now a change came over him. His ideas became much clearer, and his reasoning powers more rational. And with this change came a great longing to have his liberty, and a dread of his mad keeper.

And poor Merle's apprehension was destined to be greatly increased before he left that mountain cavern. The Wild Man gave him another drink and then sprung to his feet, pacing the cave with Merle in his arms.

The latter never once endeavored to speak to his captor, for he was afraid of changing his present mild mood to one of fury.

When, at times, the face of the crazed being was revealed more plainly to Merle, he was startled, for there was something in it which appeared familiar, which seemed to transport him back to his boyish days.

Yet, for the life of him, he could not bring himself to believe he had ever seen the Wild Man in the long ago, or connect his visage with the buried past. Ere long the quieting effects of the stimulant began to be observable, and Merle Montrose fell asleep.

This pleased his keeper, and he carefully laid the still form on the couch, tenderly placing some skins over him.

After this, the madman proved, beyond doubt, that he had noticed and reasoned cunningly. He had detected Merle's dread of him, his uneasiness, and strong desire to escape.

Consequently, he at once made preparations to prevent his *protege* from leaving him, by walling up the entrance to the cave-chamber with huge stones; leaving open spaces, but none of them sufficiently large to allow of Merle's crawling through.

This done, he collected a large quantity of fuel, which he brought into the cave; kindling a fire at the outer end of the walled-up passage, where Merle could see the blaze when he awoke—the smoke passing through a hole in the top of the cavern.

This done, the Wild Man began his preparations for supper, which were scarcely completed when his captive awoke. He stared around him in amazement; and his keeper, then coming up, offered him a bountiful supply of well-cooked venison.

Merle was burning with inward fever, and his craving for stimulants was almost unendurable. When he perceived his flask, he clutched it instantly; pouring the last drop of its contents into his parched mouth. But there was only just sufficient of the liquor to aggravate his thirst; and not until then, when he saw that he was inclosed in the cavern beyond the power of escape, and with the Wild Man of the Mogollons guarding him—not until then did he realize that he must suffer the horrors of the lost, for want of the liquor that would keep him in a sane state.

When he fully comprehended that, without doubt, he would, to a greater or less degree, suffer from *mania a potu* in that awful place, where his horrid visions would be rendered

more fearful still, poor Merle was almost ready to dash his brains out against the rock wall of his prison.

He could not eat the meat that was offered him. The mere scent of it made him deathly sick.

But, it is needless to detail the awful sufferings the poor fellow experienced in that mountain cavern. The fire was kept burning, and the Wild Man remained seated, watching him continually through a hole between the rocks; the face of the strange mortal expressing deep sympathy and bewilderment, as if he were at a loss to understand the cause of his captive's suffering, and puzzled as to what he should do to relieve him.

Merle Montrose was now more mad than sane. He pleaded, at times, for his liberty; at others, threatening the Wild Man, and throwing stones at him. He ran, with shrieks, from one side of the cave to the other, to avoid and escape the horrible shapes that were conjured up in his demoralized and maddened brain.

In short, Merle was much more of a lunatic in actions and appearance than his keeper, who, during the young man's most violent paroxysms, moved up and down, moaning and wringing his claw-like hands in sympathy.

But utterly prostrated by his own violence, Merle at length slept; that is, he fell into a lethargy most deathlike, that lasted for hours. He then awoke, and the fearful scenes were re-enacted.

Finally, after nearly three days of the most agonizing torture, poor Merle found himself so weak that he could not leave his couch of skins.

The Wild Man, seeing his condition, tore down the barrier of stones and went up to his apparently dying charge; gazing at him with every show of sympathy.

Merle pointed his trembling finger to the empty flask which lay near him, and cried out, faintly:

"Nugget Notch! whisky! whisky!"

This he repeated over and over again.

At length his crazed captor seemed to comprehend him and, clutching the flask, he sprung from the cavern.

CHAPTER XIV.

BIG BUGLE'S BENEFIT.

LIVELY times were anticipated at Buglepaint Bazaar; but, had the men of Nugget Notch known, as the reader does, of those who were approaching the town, and the object of the different parties in visiting the Notch, they would have been expecting more lively times than they really did, and from a far different source from any that they dreamed of in their philosophy.

Three days have passed since the events happened in the burg that have been recorded, and Peapod, with Nonita, are now quite near and approaching Nugget Notch; having left Meta Montrose at Tucson—much against that maiden's desire.

We are confident, also, that the outlaw band, who, according to the letter written to Buck Bradley, started for a certain point, at about the same time as the mail stage, are not far distant. Buck had left Tucson to meet the bandits with whom, as the epistle proved, he had formed a compact.

He would now arrange an order of proceedings with the bandits and have time to reach the Notch, possibly ahead of Peapod and the young squaw, as he set out from Tucson before they did, and had greater cause for haste.

During the six days that had passed since Nonita had been rescued by Merle Montrose, but one strange incident had occurred in Nugget Notch; but this had been of a character so totally unexpected, that it had caused considerable excitement.

It had happened on the third night after Merle's encounter with the Apaches.

Buglepaint Bazaar was well filled with night-loungers, drinking and carousing, and Big Bugle was in his element, when, who should spring into the room, in mad bounds, but the Wild Man of the Mogollons, whom none of them had seen previously, except at a distance.

All started aside, as he clutched a decanter of liquor which stood upon the bar, and, with a frightful yell, darted from the room, and vanished in the darkness.

The sight of the strange being had a singularly sedative effect. As he had never before been seen in or near the Notch, and, of course, living as he did, was not in the habit of indulging in strong drink, having no means of obtaining the same, there were not a few speculations as to what his visit could mean.

*It is unnecessary to say that the crazed cave-dweller had comprehended that his captive was suffering greatly; and, from his having pointed to the empty whisky-flask, the contents of which had benefited him so much the previous evening, the Wild Man started at once on his mission of mercy. Having lost Merle's flask, as he ran down the range, he dashed into the Bazaar, and secured a decanter as detailed.

There was not one there who sought to hinder, much less to harm him. All were, to a greater or less extent, superstitious, and held the opin-

ion that, if they should kill the Wild Man of the Mountains, it would bring disaster or death to themselves.

However, so sudden had been his entrance and exit, that not one present had time to draw a weapon.

But, at the end of the three days mentioned, no one any longer thought of the occurrence, except Big Bugle, who mourned the loss of his decanter; and that date was destined to open up a chain of events that were to keep the denizens of Nugget Notch in a continual state of mad excitement. It had been a calm preceding the storm.

It was about nine o'clock on the night in question, and Buglepaint Bazaar was tolerably well filled with the rough men of the mines—range bidders, card-sharps, and border roughs—all, at times, priming themselves with the "fire-water," which brings man's worst passions to the front, and drowns his best and noblest principles and impulses.

There were half a dozen monte banks in the rear of the large room, all being well patronized, some score or more of betters being collected around each, while the click of the roulette-ball sounded from one corner in the distance.

At or near the bar stood a number of the very toughest of the crowd, all more or less under the influence of liquor.

Big Bugle was enthroned behind the counter, having no assistant; and was so busy that he had not time to rinse off, occasionally, the glasses. The click of coin sounded almost continuously, and was broken only by the curses and ejaculations of those at the tables, as a big stake was "raked in" by some dealer, or a miner made a "big hole" in the bank.

The business had not really started for the night; as, when a few miners had won or lost to any great extent, there would be a rush to the bar, and "general irrigates" became the order of the night. Big Bugle knew that he was going to have a profitable night of it, provided the crowd did not get too full, and begin to smash things; and he determined to secure the favor and kind consideration of the "worst pills in the box," by treating those who had not sufficient money to risk going dry by "bucking it" at monte.

Having thus made up his mind, mine host put on a bold, patronizing air, brought his fist down hard on the bar counter, causing the glasses to jump and ring.

"Come on, poys," he urged, "und have a trink mit Pig Bugle! Tam dot eggspense, I say; it goes mit brofit und loss, like dot tecanter vot dot vile mans runs away mit already. Vell," with a heavy sigh, "I regons he t'rows it away ven he trinks de visky, don't it. Vot you lookin' at, poys? Vot vas struck you?"

"Struck!" exclaimed one, as all rushed wildly to the bar; "struck air ther way ter put hit, Big Bugle—dogged ef hit ain't!"

"Why, we-'uns air all struck, an' mighty hard too; but yer kin put in them sort o' knocks jist es often as yer want, an' not cross a ha'r o' we-'uns. Hey, pards?"

"Thet's ther way ter sift ther lingo! Pour out a heffy dose, pards; fer hit might never come round ter be Big Bugle's treat ag'in. This air ther fu'st time, I reckon!"

"Rah fer Dutchy!"

All poured their liquor out into the glasses, nearly filling the same to the brim; but the landlord controlled himself, and manifested no sign of displeasure.

"Big Bugle," yelled one, "hyer we-'uns air et full cock an' ready ter pour p'ison. We're yer most obsequ'ous obee-gents ontill nex' drink—ef hit ain't too long a time.

"I'm a long-horn howler, an' ready ter asserwate ye're a purty squar' leetle Dutchman, ef yer nose don't git ther best o' yer. Hit air a beauty, an' no discount.

"Nugget Notch air proud o' hev'in' ther biggest-nosed pilgrim on ther range. Yer doesn't hev ter smell twic't, ter find out what's what—I'll gamble on that!"

"That's a hummer, that drink what Big Bugle's goin' ter git outside of, boyees; but hit ain't ther fu'st, by a good many, he's soaked his nose in since sun-up. But, here's fun! Big Bugle, may yer probossus grow perdigious, an' never git bored more nat'ral, like yer years war!"

At this sally, the crowd roared with laughter.

But, hardly had they replaced their glasses upon the bar, when their attention was attracted to a person who had just entered.

The curtain was now up. The scene had changed. The great play of mingled tragedy and comedy, which was to claim as actors the men of Nugget Notch, had commenced.

Before proceeding further, however, we will explain that, Captain Hold-up, the correspondent of Buck Bradley, and his bandits, increased in number by confederating with Donna Diablo and her band, had reached the cavern which was their destination. A little later, Buck had joined them.

It was not long before an organized plan of operations was formed, the first part of which was to gain possession of the persons of Meta Montrose and her uncle Maurice. Merle, as

Buck supposed, was at the Notch, and could be easily secured.

Having been made thoroughly acquainted with the affairs of Buck Bradley, Donna Diablo had given that worthy to understand that she knew of the whereabouts of Maurice Montrose, through a man, known as Old Mystery, and who resided at Nugget Notch.

This person had declared that he could produce Montrose at any time, if given but a few hours' notice.

Hence, Buck believed he had the game in his own hands. But no sooner had he given his information in regard to Peapod's being in Tucson, and that he had not only met Meta Montrose, but had promised to go to Nugget Notch in search of her brother, than the female chieftain demanded a pledge from all, that they should not take the life of Peapod; she claiming him for her exclusive game. It was plain that Donna Diablo had, at some time, become infatuated with the professor.

The agreement was made, and, as Peapod was supposed to be, by that time, at the Notch, Donna Diablo asked to be allowed to go there herself, and open the ball. Captain Hold-up was to go to Tucson, and abduct Meta. Donna's men were to enter Nugget Notch, one by one, and mingle with the miners, to co-operate with her if needed. While there, they were to secure Old Mystery, for the purpose of getting information from him respecting Maurice Montrose.

Thus it will be seen, that trouble deep and dark, was brewing for our friends; and that Buck Bradley, the dastardly plotter, appeared to have everything in his own hands—everything pointing to a favorable issue with him, and a disastrous one with Meta, Merle, and Maurice Montrose.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MAID OF THE MOUNTAINS.

WHEN Big Bugle detected the wondering glances of the bummers, he brought his own optics to bear in the same direction. He expected something startling, and he was not disappointed.

The figure that stood just free from the side of the screen in front of the entrance, was, beyond doubt, that of a woman, although habited in man's attire. Her costume was a well-fitting one of black velvet, and profusely decorated with gold buttons. Pistols and a long dagger of exquisite workmanship were in her belt, and she carried a riding-whip, the butt-end of which was of solid silver. The dress was handsome, and the wearer was handsome also.

Her hair would, of itself, have betrayed her sex, for it hung in rich abundance below her waist. It was black as midnight, and straight as that of an Indian; indeed, it was evident that there was much of the red-man's blood in her veins. Her face would have been perfect had it not been for the serpent-like look in her black eyes, and the occasional treacherous expression.

She wore high-topped boots, with silver spurs, and, upon her head, thrust upon the left side, the front of the brim pinned to the top of the crown with a silver dagger, was a fine soft felt sombrero, the band being a pair of gold snakes wound about each other in a writhing manner.

Such was the picture that greeted the astonished eyes of Big Bugle and the bummers when they turned toward the door.

It was Donna Diablo, the Bandit Queen.

Little had she cared for Buck Bradley or his plots until he had mentioned the fact that Peapod would serve Meta Montrose, and that not for money, but rather love.

This had aroused the demon of jealousy in the heart and brain of the passionate woman. She vowed in her heart that Meta should never be the wife of Prentiss Pierce.

She resolved that the latter should become her captive, that he should sue upon his knees to her for his liberty; and yet, at times, this seemed to her an absurd idea to entertain. But he should be hers in some way. That much she had sworn.

Her band had been greatly reduced in number. The country around Tombstone had become too hot for them, and Nugget Notch promised a good harvest. Donna Diablo had come there with a determination to astonish the natives. She was unknown there, and she knew that no one would recognize her.

When she paused, just within the entrance of Buglepoint Bazaar, the Outlaw Queen gave the bummers but a flitting glance of contempt. Her black eyes swept the gaming end of the apartment, hoping to catch a view of the one man whom she would have sought in any crowd.

Her aim was to fascinate Peapod, in an unmasked display of her fine face and form; "costumed to kill," and acting in such a manner as to secure him as her champion. But he was not to be seen.

"Vino dulce," (sweet wine), ordered Donna Diablo, stepping up to the bar.

Big Bugle did not comprehend, in his wonder and embarrassment, the senorita's order; but one of the delectable bystanders, seeing an opening to place himself in a conspicuous position, and also gain another drink, sprung to the inner end of the bar, and catching up a decanter of wine and a tiny glass, came forward, doffing his

sombrero with a ludicrous attempt at politeness.

"Hyer ye air, my lady," he said, gallantly. "I'm a long-horned howler, an' war hatched in a hurrah's nest, but I reckon I knows 'nough ter be right ready to wait on a reg'lar ban'-box beauty o' ther femernine sect. Yer must sorter overlook ther lan'lord, fer he's kinder flustered. Hyer ye air! Yours truly, Long-Horn, the Howler."

The Bandit Queen gave a crack of her whip, which attracted the attention of even the crowd around the tables, and then stepped toward the polite Long-Horn; but an idea seemed suddenly to strike her, and she sprung back in a most graceful and panther-like manner.

Cutting the air over her head in a series of circles with her whip, and so fast that no eye could follow the lash, before her would-be entertainer could comprehend her object, it hissed toward him, the end coiling, with a sound like the report of a pistol, around the long glass stopple of the decanter he still held in his hand.

A twitch, and the stopple flew free and into the air, and was then dexterously caught by the fair performer. She then accepted the glass and decanter from Long-Horn, and poured out a small quantity of the wine, saying, politely:

"Gracias, my friend! Please join me. Help yourself to anything our stupid German friend has to sell. He's so struck at seeing a woman that he can't attend to business."

"Dang ther Dutchman!" said the much-flattered Long-Horn, who was jubilant at having the honor of drinking with one whom he knew many in the room would give considerable to click glasses with.

No stronger contrast between two of the human family could well be imagined than that between the ragged, uncouth, camp-soiled Texan and the Mexican beauty; but the two touched glasses and drank together.

"Hyer ter yeou, until ther hull earth bu'sts up!" cried the enthusiastic Long-Horn.

It would have been difficult to find a more astonished set of men than the denizens of Buglepoint Bazaar, as they "took in" the sight before them.

When the senorita had snapped the stopple from the decanter, many had drawn in heavy breaths, preparatory to giving a wild hurrah; but the hisses of disapprobation from others, who did not wish to lose a point in the show, prevented the yells. So silence prevailed.

As to Big Bugle, he scarcely knew whether he was asleep or awake.

He had at first, entertained a suspicion that the Wild Man was about to pay him a second visit; but he soon saw that this was not so. He, however, had later cause to regret that it had not been the mountain maniac, in place of the beautiful "what is it?"

He now stood, leaning back against his shelves and filled with fear and wonder.

After Donna Diablo, and Long-Horn had drank, the former took the whisky bottle and glass, and, going from one of the bummers to the other, filled and passed it to each in turn. This was a new way of treating, but it "took" amazingly; especially with those most interested who held their hats crushed under their arms as the beauty thus approached them.

This proceeding increased the wonder of all, and created jealousy in those who were unfortunate, as they now realized, in being in the gaming portion of the room.

No man could have created such excitement, as a matter of course.

Donna Diablo threw a twenty-dollar gold piece upon the counter, saying—

"There's your money, Big Nose!"

The landlord started, clutched the coin, placing it between his teeth, to make sure of it. He then hastily mopped his face with the towel that had been used in polishing glasses. But this was no time for ceremony.

He was almost as dumfounded at the sight of the double-eagle as he had been by the appearance of the senorita, for he had not looked to receive anything in payment for what had been drank.

"Dunder und blitzen!" he gasped. "I vos Pig Bugle, matam; und I vos all proke up, you vos so pewtiful, alreatty. I vos von great laty's man myselluf, but I vos not von voman see in long dimes, don't it—never such voman, as vos yourselluf."

"You vos velcome as never vos. Py tam, I vish you comes every tay to dot Nugget Nodgel Dot vos so, ain't it?"

Big Bugle was himself again, and a trifle more.

The Bandit Queen saw she had made a hit. Gracefully, and with a winning smile, her keen velvety eyes flashing from one to another of the men who were now clustered together in the gaming-room, she again circled her whip in invitation; her queenly form bending in perfect unison with each glance and motion, as she said:

"Come up, pilgrims, and pour your poison with—well, 'The Maid of the Mountains.' That name will do me for the present."

A rousing cheer broke from every mouth, and the last man in the apartment doffed his som-

brero; each bowing low, as he strode up to the bar. There they ranged themselves, two and three deep; but, in an orderly manner, while they gazed in mingled admiration, respect, and wonder, at Donna Diablo.

The eccentric beauty slipped behind the bar, helped herself to a cigar, and leaned gracefully against the end of the counter, smoking, and idly tapping the floor with her riding-whip.

Even the monte dealers, leaving one of their number to guard the banks, came to pay silent homage to the beauty, who had, so to speak, flown down as from the skies into Nugget Notch.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MONTE QUEEN.

THERE was not a man in Big Bugle's establishment, who had the least idea who the fair stranger was, or where she had come from.

It was certain that she had been much among the American mining-towns, or she could not have acquired the vernacular so well. She had not come direct from Mexico, or, if so, had been merely there on a visit.

Her appearance in Nugget Notch was a mystery, as was also her object; but all could not but hope she had come to stay. If she could be induced to remain, how proud they would be of her!

She should be Queen of Nugget Notch.

This was the general verdict.

All were satisfied that she was a character not often met with, even in the mines.

She was young and beautiful, but it was a beauty that was semi-savage. The rough miners came to the conclusion, that she was a woman who had been deeply wronged; and that she was now searching for her deceiver. Her sufferings had made her reckless as to the society she frequented, and she therefore forced herself to feel at home in and among crowds of men; and the more so, probably, for the reason that she expected to meet in that way the man of whom she was in search.

On this account, she would have had their sympathy, even had she not succeeded so signally in winning their admiration. Yet, some asked themselves—why had she assumed masculine apparel?

She had no need of this in her search, it was plain to all, especially as she made no attempt to disguise her sex.

Yet to no other object could the miners attribute her visit, and she did not explain or appear to be one who intended to explain her motives in thus masquerading in male attire. All their theories were, however, soon to be cast to the earth, and they were speedily to find that they had been grossly deceived.

All had drank who could stand at the bar, when they had given way to another line of men, each line saluting and drinking the health of the "Maid of the Mountains."

Something in connection with her presence and bearing seemed to hush the natural boisterousness of the crowd.

At length all had satisfied their thirst. They had been unable, any of them, to refuse a free treat, even from a woman.

Donna Diablo, however, showed plainly that she was not only perfectly self-possessed in her strange position, but that she was bent upon business, and that without much show of sentiment.

No man was more pleased to see this manifested than Big Bugle. With profuse thanks, he proceeded to tell out the change that was over from the double eagle previously paid him.

The crowd eyed the pair and cast furtive glances at each other.

Not one among them could recall a time in his life when he had been so impressed.

When the landlord had gotten his dues, Donna Diablo suddenly straightened up and faced the assemblage, addressing them in a clear, concise and yet silvery voice:

"Pards of Nugget Notch, I've come to see you for fun and business combined. I am going in for amusement first, and biz afterward. I intend to get "broke" to-night, or break every monte bank in this ranch. That's my little racket."

This was sufficient to break the spell. A boisterous cheering tore down the veil of mystery which they had spread over the fair stranger, and, although her avowed object in coming to the Notch had placed her on a lower pedestal than that which she had previously occupied in the minds of the miners, yet she was perfectly safe, and would be treated with respect and fairness—indeed, woe be to the "card sharp" who would attempt to cheat her.

She had, as she intended, with her own hand torn down the barrier of reserve between herself and the denizens of Nugget Notch. This was shown, the moment she avowed her intention of breaking all the monte banks; for the very building shook and trembled with the terrific cheers and tremendous stamping of feet that followed.

The lip of the Monte Queen slightly curled in scorn, as she bowed gracefully in acknowledgment. Then she said, when the din had somewhat subsided:

"Better wait until I clean out the banks before you indorse me so strongly. But let me

say, right here, if any card-flipping galoot plays a snide game on me, there'll be music in the air. This is my night to win. I know it by the blink of the stars. And if square games are dealt here—and I'll see that they are square—I'll win. "You can bet your boots on that, pards of Nugget Notch!"

Another round of cheers followed.

Then one pilgrim, who seemed too rejoiced to stand still, swore that the "hull capoodle" must drink with him "before a card war flipped—ther Monte Queen counted in!"

Pleased with having made a good impression, which she had cunningly aimed to do, in order to give them even a greater surprise at her exit than she had at her entrance, Donna Diablo agreed, and the rattle of glasses and hilarious laughter and jests that followed, proved that the crowd anticipated a night of rare enjoyment.

All were grateful to the Monte Queen for having stirred things up, and not a few expressed the hope that she would locate in Nugget Notch for good and all.

The gamblers were especially glad to know that the arrival of the Mexican beauty was to be, as they hoped, a "big thing" for them.

They had been greatly annoyed at having their games broken up, by all rushing to see the wonderful stranger, who was invested with tenfold interest from the fact that she was the first female who had honored the Notch with her presence. The passage of Nonita through the burg had been unknown to any of them.

But at the same time, they were somewhat suspicious that they would not have a "soft snap" when the Monte Queen "went" for their banks. She might be only "blowing" for effect, and might not have money enough to "tap" the smallest bank there; but that did not seem probable.

One by one at least a dozen villainous-looking Mexicans had entered by the rear door during the excitement, and worked their way into the outskirts of the crowd. Every one of these was a sworn follower of the Bandit Queen, and not one was there of the lot who would not, without the slightest hesitation, have braved almost certain death to defend their beautiful leader.

These strangers were not in much danger of being particularly noticed, Donna Diablo having purposely created excitement in order to favor the entrance of her followers.

After all hands had drank at the expense of the elated miner, the Queen blew a piercing whistle; and a moment after, to the astonishment of all, a beautiful girl, not more than five years of age, rode in from the plaza upon a very small mouse-colored donkey—the child being dressed in the gayest manner, and the burro caparisoned accordingly.

Smiling to the right and left, and tossing kisses from her finger-tips to the miners, as they parted on either side, she guided the animal directly to where Donna Diablo stood. The latter embraced the little one, and then took from the cantle of the saddle a buckskin bag, which she slammed down upon the counter; the rattle and chink of coin betraying its contents.

Then came a whispered word or two, and out between the two lines of miners went the child and the burro, and into the plaza.

The wonder and astonishment of the men of Nugget Notch was more profound than ever. They were, for the time, incapable of speech or motion. Nothing could now exceed their bewilderment.

The Monte Queen paid but slight attention to the emotions of those around her, but, taking the bag of gold so strangely brought to her, she walked with supple grace toward the gaming portion of the establishment.

No sooner had she turned her face from the crowd, than, gazing from one to another in mingled bewilderment and suspense, all being completely astounded, ejaculations in keeping with such feelings flew from lip to lip:

"Wa'al, dang my ole heart!"

"War hit a rale human?"

"A angel, dead sure an' sart'in!"

"Somebody glide arter ther leetle one!"

"Thar's either good er bad luck, one, come ter Nugget Notch."

"Corral ther young 'un, an' le's keep her, jack an' all, in ther burg! Hit won't do ter 'low her ter git away."

"Whar, in thunder, did she come from?"

"Whar's she levanted to?"

"Who air ther leetle one, an' who ther dickens air our Monte Queen any way?"

These, and hundreds of like questions passed from one to another, when Boss Blazer, the sheriff, suddenly started from the room, followed by half-a-dozen men whom he had called upon to go with him.

The crowd waited with intense impatience, the return of these searchers, who had, as all knew, gone out with the intention of bringing the child back.

All interest in the Monte Queen was, for the moment, banished.

None thought of questioning her in regard to the little stranger, for, well-assured were they that no information could be obtained from the Mexican woman.

Boss Blazer soon returned, and the men who had gone with him.

All looked strange and pale, their eyes having a scared look.

"She's flewed back, pards," explained the sheriff, pointing upward; "gone up, jack an' all! Hit's a dead sure thing, fer hit's moonlight, an' we-uns hev bin clean through the Notch—half one way, half t'other. She c'u'dn't ha' got beyand outen sight, thet's sart'in sure."

"Pards, thar's somethin' goin' ter happen, sure es shootin'. This hyer burg's goin' ter bust higher'n a kite, else thar'll be just a big bonanza. Hit means a heap, some way. Hit's a warnin', an' thet bag o' gold war a blind."

Some of the miners glanced toward the Monte Queen, hoping for some explanation.

"Pards," continued Boss Blazer, "somethin's comin' sure, an' I'm goin' ter keep my peepers open."

"Gott in himmel!" put in Big Bugle, in great excitement. "I dinks I shoost glose up dot 'tablissement of mine, don't it, and grawl in some hole already."

"Next vot comes vill be a zyglone er somedings vot knocks dot Nodge all do bieces, ain't it. Vot you dinks, eh? Dunder und blitzen! I feels pad in mine head, und all over. Dot vos so."

Just then, there came a wild cheer from the first gaming-table.

"Rah fer ther Monte Queen!"

Donna Diablo had been, so far, as good as her word.

She had broken the first bank she had "tapped," and that on the first turn.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FIGHT IN THE PLAZA.

It was not strange that the men of Nugget Notch half-believed that they had been treated to a vision of something supernatural, when the child so suddenly came into their midst, and as suddenly vanished.

Boss Blazer felt it his duty, in his official capacity, to investigate the matter more thoroughly; but he, like every one else, was drawn toward the gaming department by the cheers of those who preceded them.

A moment after, and Donna Diablo, with the second table to which she stepped, was the center of a wide circle of humanity. She had, at once, upon reaching the first table, inquired the amount in the bank; and, on being given permission to "tap" it, placed that sum on one of the cards of a "lay-out." The dealer was required to shuffle, give her a "cut," and allow her the choice of the three pairs of cards which formed "lay-outs," the chosen one to decide the fate of the bank.

This, with those who have sufficient funds to thus bet, is quite a common way where Spanish monte is dealt.

The second bank, favored by Donna Diablo with her patronage, was of fifteen hundred dollars, and the pards who ran the game—one dealing, and the other paying the bets and raking the winnings—were willing to take a "tap," more so, from the fact that the Mexican beauty had broken the other bank, for they did not believe her luck would hold out.

The cards were shuffled and cut. The Monte Queen drew the knave and ace.

She accepted them as a "lay-out," and tapped the bank on the knave. Fully a quarter of the deck was slipped off, before a card of either of these denominations was revealed.

Then it was a knave.

The bank was broken!

Donna Diablo had now won over twenty-five hundred dollars.

The dealer flipped off the next card, and a bitter oath broke from his lips.

It was an ace.

There had been but one card between him and his bank!

The cheers of the miners were deafening, but Donna Diablo manifested no emotion whatever. She had perceived that the sheriff was of a suspicious nature, and she knew that he was a power in the burg.

As a stroke of policy, she therefore scooped her winnings into the bag, and requested Boss Blazer to favor her by holding it.

She played a trump card when she did this; for the sheriff, blushing like an awkward school-boy, and utterly surprised, accepted the trust, amid the hurrahs of the crowd.

The other monte-dealers had been astonished at the extraordinary luck of the Monte Queen. All began to think that the miners had not misnamed her; but they still hoped, each one, to win a sum equal to that in his own bank. She had gold enough now, to double three or four times on any bank there, should she lose; and this was a rich opening, which not one among them cared to let slip by.

Donna Diablo proceeded to the next table, Boss Blazer following, with the bag of coin.

This bank she also broke, and the next, and so on to the last; but three times she had lost on the first "lay-out," and was obliged to "tap" double the amount that had been in those banks when she struck the tables. Every bank was now broken.

The Monte Queen was some ten thousand dollars and more the winner.

At her request, the sheriff carried the bag of

money to the bar, where he placed it on the counter before her, with an awkward bow. She gave him a smile of thanks, and ordered drinks for the crowd; taking out a number of gold pieces, and placing them on the bar, to the great delight of Big Bugle.

The crowd was now boisterous in the extreme; but, at that moment, the clatter of hoofs was heard on the plaza, and the next a man rushed into Buglepaint Bazaar, wild with excitement, and quite pale.

All turned, in wondering expectation.

"Pards o' Nugget Notch!" he yelled; "thar's bin a fight wi' Faches, jist up range on ther north side. Thar's six o' ther scum laid cut cold, without thar heads bein' skinned; an' thet goes fer ter prove hit war white boyees what fit 'em. Ther fight must ha' bin nigh on ter a week ago. Who's missin' from ther Notch?"

At that moment Donna Diablo gave a silent signal to one of her Mexican followers. He and the others made their way out.

"Thar's nobody missin'," replied the sheriff, "ceptin' Buck an' Bill Bradley. They've bin gone 'bout a week. Hit's them, dead sure!"

The Monte Queen drank in every word.

All eyes were turned upon the new-comer, who made his way to the middle of the bar, caught up a bottle, and helped himself to a glass of its contents.

Just then a piercing whistle sounded through the Bazaar, and all started toward the front entrance. All that they had witnessed on that eventful night was as nothing, compared with that which now rendered all speechless and immovable.

It was, indeed, an imposing spectacle.

There had been, in a very brief time, a most startling transformation.

The Monte Queen and her money had disappeared, as had also the huge screen that had stood before the wide main entrance to Buglepaint Bazaar.

This last had been noiselessly moved to one side.

But through the door could be seen plainly in the bright moonlight, seated upon a superb black horse, none other—all were satisfied—than the Monte Queen!

But far different did she now appear.

Three red plumes waved from her hat, while a black mask concealed her face.

There she sat, and, at the very instant the crowd whirled to look at her, up went her right arm, a glittering tube extended from her hand.

A spurt of fire, a report, a yell of agony, and Big Bugle threw up his arms wildly, and fell to the ground!

As the report died away in echoes up the range, the little girl whom we have previously seen darted in front of the Monte Queen. If there was ever an assemblage of men beyond expression astounded, it was the one in Buglepaint Bazaar at that moment.

Then another startling event occurred.

The man who had brought the news of the finding of the dead Apaches, was a finely-formed and handsome specimen of manhood, who had evidently assumed the rough speech of the men of the mountains. He had not observed the Monte Queen, who had stood next the bar, at the inner end of the screen as he had entered; but, at the signal, he had worked his way to the front of the miners, and there he stood as if paralyzed.

His eyes were fixed upon the woman in black; his face was the hue of death, and his form was rigid; but, at the appearance of the little girl upon the burro, he yelled, in an anguished voice, torturing to hear:

"It is Donna Diablo, the she-devil! She seeks my life. Let her kill me, but I must have my child, my Paquita!"

He sprang madly forward. The little girl held out her arms with a glad cry of recognition.

He caught the child from her saddle, but at that moment another sharp report rung out from the revolver of Donna Diablo, and the man fell forward in front of the crowd.

With one mad bound, Boss Blazer sprang and caught both man and child in his arms.

"Come on, pards!" he yelled. "Down with the she-devil's hoss, an' we'll catch her an' stretch her cussed neck!"

There was a mad rush of the men of Nugget Notch, but suddenly they halted.

All stood, frozen in their tracks, for before them on the opposite side of the plaza, in the full glare of the moonlight, was presented a more startling scene than had yet greeted their eyes during the night.

It was one that called for immediate action on their part, yet all stood in open-mouthed astonishment.

The rattling discharge of revolvers, yells of despair and death, and fierce oaths in Spanish filled the night air.

A terrible fight was in progress in the very plaza of Nugget Notch.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PEAPOD PUTS IN AN APPEARANCE.

It was not strange that the men of Nugget Notch were dumfounded.

The Monte Queen, whom they all then knew

to be the notorious bandit leader of Arizona, was now speeding across the plaza, a line of Greasers on each side of her, evidently confident that they were perfectly safe. They had been forced to leave the little daughter of Donna Diablo, but felt confident they would soon regain possession of her.

The Outlaw Queen was furiously exultant. She had, as she believed, slain the husband whom she hated as deeply as she had once loved him, who had deserted her and taken their child, which she had again stolen from him—the innocent little one that she had used to forward her plans of robbery.

But it so happened that Donna Diablo and her band of cut-throats were not to escape as easily and safely as they believed they would; for at that very time Peapod and Nonita were speeding between the shanties, which at that point had trees growing between, rendering it quite dark.

They had heard the two reports of Donna Diablo's revolver, when they were riding up the Notch trail, and had at once, not only prepared themselves for anything that might happen, but had hastened the speed of their horses.

As they caught a glimpse of the bandits, Peapod at once comprehended the true state of affairs. He called out to the young Navajo squaw on the instant:

"Pull your lasso, Pink, and we'll proceed to pile on that procession. Propel your rope to bring that pirate that promenades without petticoats procumbent on the plaza."

These instructions were hardly needed.

It was simply necessary for Peapod to say, "lasso," and to mention the she-pirate as Nonita's game. Quickly the young squaw made ready her long pliable rope of rawhide which had hung at her saddle-horn, adjusting the noose. Peapod had realized at once that the bandits would be compelled to separate for the purpose of passing between the shanties, or the greater number of them would rein in and fall in the rear.

In either case he felt that he could slay a number, and demoralize the others; depending upon Nonita to capture Donna Diablo. The supple form of the Indian maiden became erect, proudly poised in her saddle; the war-spirit of her people blazing in her eyes, for she felt sure that the female bandit had visited Nugget Notch for the express purpose of capturing Merle Montrose.

The pair darted out from the pines, when Donna Diablo, with two of her swarthy band on each side of her, had galloped from the plaza; the other Mexicans guiding their animals to the right and left, and dividing into two parties. Hardly had they gotten beyond the front of the shanties, when Peapod and his companion were upon them; the horses of the pair springing wildly and snorting with pain and fright as they felt the cruel spurs.

Donna Diablo had treated the men of Nugget Notch to several astonishing surprises, but it had now come her turn to be startled and alarmed. But her thoughts flashed like lightning.

There was no time to draw weapons, and the revolvers of Peapod, whom she had not recognized in the darkness, were belching fire and lead, as she whirled her horse, and spurred back upon the moonlit plaza. But that proved a disastrous move for the Bandit Queen. Nonita was on the alert.

The lasso of the Navajo maiden hissed through the air, and the noose fell over the head, and slipped over the shoulders of Donna Diablo, binding tight her arms to her side. At the same instant her black steed sprang madly forward in fright, and the Mexican woman was thrown from her saddle; falling with violence upon the plaza.

At first the Greasers had been so dumfounded that they were incapable of defense. Then the weapons of the Professor began to speak, and to the point; for he knew that in a little time the other swarthy followers of Donna Diablo would be upon him.

Before this occurred, however, the four who strove to protect the retreat of their queen, had bit the dust; all shot in the back, and all falling upon the plaza, their mustangs stampeding wildly hither and thither.

Then, as the eight remaining Greasers galloped from the rear of the shanties, to find their queen a captive, and their comrades slain, the sight was grand indeed, but terrible.

But soon the prostrate leader of the gang in her writhings, loosened the noose of the lasso, and sprung to her feet; the fury of a wounded tigress on her face, and in her eyes.

Quickly giving a piercing whistle, her horse came bounding back from the plaza, and Donna Diablo sprung into her saddle; at the same time drawing her revolver, and as Nonita and Peapod gazed around, she fired a shot at each.

The weapon of the professor dropped from his hand, and the young squaw fell to the earth as if dead!

With a shriek of exultation, the outlaw leader drove spurs; firing the remaining shots in her pistol back among the miners.

When Boss Blazer and some of his pards reached Peapod, they found his arm had been but slightly injured. The sheriff then rushed to Nonita.

The fall of the Indian girl, whose daring bravery had won the admiration of all, had made the miners mad for revenge. But, when Boss Blazer announced that she had received no serious wound, but had merely been rendered insensible by the bullet of the Bandit Queen having grazed her skull, the air rung with their joyous whoops.

The Navajo maiden was carried to the hotel, and her injury attended to. The man who had been shot by Donna Diablo, had by this time recovered, and was seated with his little daughter, Paquita, in his arms.

There was no one in Buglepaint Bazaar, except these and the proprietor, the latter being also wounded. Two of the bandits had been picked up who had been wounded by the bullets of Peapod. Only four had escaped, as six lay dead, and two had been captured, in a badly wounded condition.

These were ghastly from loss of blood, and with terror.

They knew that they were doomed.

There was no mercy in the faces of the mad mob, and death was in their yells.

Peapod, assured that Nonita was in no danger, was now quietly extracting the bullet from his arm, and paying no attention whatever to the din. Excited as all were, there were none who did not notice, at times, this remarkable man.

But they were all wild for revenge.

They had been prevented from participating in the "circus," had been badly fooled all around by Donna Diablo, and were now furious to have a hand in the partial wiping out of the disgrace upon themselves and the town.

"Whar's Boss Blazer?"

"Oh, yes! oh, yes! Big Bla-a-azer!"

"Hang up ther yaller cut-throats!"

"String 'em on a lasso!"

"Choke 'em off, ther condemned cusses!"

"Fotch a rope, somebody!"

These, and like yells, rung on all sides, until at length the sheriff joined the mob; when he at once ordered the crowd to take the Greasers up the side of the gulch wall, to a point where the long stub of a tree, and the roots which sustained it, leaned toward the town.

His order was greeted with loud cries of approval.

The captive outlaws were dragged across the plaza, between the rows of buildings, and then up the side of the range; but a few men being able to climb the narrow and rocky trail, to the tree from which the winds had torn the branches, and which a dislodgment of rock had forced to an almost horizontal position.

The madly-exultant mob remained below, whooping fiercely.

Boss Blazer superintended the execution; and, in a short space of time the two Mexicans were swaying from the skeleton tree, high over Nugget Notch, and in plain view from the trail up and down the range.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DOVE IN THE EAGLE'S NEST.

META MONTROSE had been much averse to being left alone at Tucson.

Since meeting with Prentiss Pierce and Nonita, she had become, though the time had been so short, very much attached to them both. In her lonely and unprotected condition, this was not to be wondered at.

The character of the professor had been represented to her in a very attractive light, and she had been disappointed. Quite the contrary indeed.

She had, at first, felt suspicious of him, owing to his strange speech and actions when they first met; but she now understood him better, and he possessed her entire confidence.

Toward the Indian maiden, Meta could not but feel kindly, when she saw the regard this bright and lovable creature had for the brother whom she sought. More than this, it seemed that Merle had battled bravely to save Nonita from Apache tortures; and it was through that fortunate meeting that Meta's subsequent good had come—viz., through the young squaw's finding the photographs which Merle had lost.

She had said good-by to Peapod and Nonita, with tears in her eyes; but had brushed them away at the request of the former, and smiled as he had bidden her. For, had he not said, that he should be sad on the trail, if his last memory of her face was not one of cheerfulness and hope?

Neither the professor nor Nonita had dreamed that it was possible for harm to come to Meta in Tucson; and she herself felt no apprehensions in that respect. But she had wished much to accompany her new-found friends, with the thought that, should they be in danger on her account, she ought to share it.

She was left alone, however, and in great anxiety passed nearly three days, and Meta was almost determined to take the next stage to Nugget Notch, when Miguel tapped at her door, and announced that a strange gentleman was below, who wished to speak with her at once.

It was a messenger sent by Captain Hold-up and Buck Bradley, who had changed their plan, on account of having considered a new project in connection with working Nugget Notch. Buck was satisfied that Meta had never

seen the hand-writing of Peapod. He therefore, decided to send her a letter by one of the band, directing her to take the stage at once for the Notch, as her brother had been found, but was very ill.

To have her come by stage would put aside any suspicions she might have in connection with the manner in which she had been sent for, and the asserted illness of her brother would cause her to set out at once.

The scheme was one which, they felt, would work to a charm.

Then, Captain Hold-up would "hold up" the "hearse," and take Miss Montrose from it; besides "going through" the other passengers. This would allow the band to get accustomed to their new quarters, recruit after their long journey, and be on hand, if anything fresh and unlooked-for turned up in consequence of the visit of Donna Diablo to Nugget Notch.

When Miguel made his announcement to Meta she was delighted, and at once descended to the ladies' parlor. There she found a man, with anything but a prepossessing appearance; but she bore in mind the vast numbers of just such, whom she had met in the mining regions, and made allowance.

The letter, which he handed her, banished all thoughts in regard to his appearance; and the man, remarking that he must start on his return at once, said that it was merely necessary for her to say that her friends might expect her on the next stage.

Upon perusing the letter, Meta was both grieved and rejoiced; the last, at hearing from her friends, and the first, at learning that the brother whom she sought was ill.

She hesitated not for an instant, but told the messenger she would be ready to set out forthwith, and the bandit departed, to convey the intelligence to his chief and Buck Bradley. Meta Montrose, as the stage was to start early on the following morning, at once began preparing for the journey.

Hence, when Donna Diablo, accompanied by her Greasers, went to the Notch, for the purpose of capturing Old Mystery and Merle Montrose, and, if possible, to make a raid on the monte banks, both Captain Hold-up and Buck Bradley were left at the cave with the land of white outlaws. These had long served under Hold-up, and with them remained some half a dozen Mexicans belonging to Donna Diablo's gang, and whom the latter had not thought it necessary to take with her.

The original meeting-place of Bradley with the bandits had been some thirty miles up the range from Nugget Notch, on the south side; but as since Buck had written to the outlaw captain of this cave, he had found another that was much more convenient, and more easy of defense, besides being but ten miles from the town, the change had been made.

To this last series of caverns the bandits had at once proceeded, as soon as Donna Diablo had left, on her complicated and dangerous mission. The retreat was situated some distance from the outer range and foot-hills, and at the head of a narrow gulch which branched from a gigantic rent in the range. This extended nearly to the heart of the same.

The bed of the larger gorge was wide and grass-grown, with clumps of trees and cacti. These afforded ample pasturage for the animals, and a guard below, could at any time, when danger threatened, drive the herd into the smaller gulch, at the head of which was a circular space forming a natural corral.

Except in one cave, where a spring bubbled from the rocks, all was dry, and entirely free from dampness; seams and cracks allowed egress to the smoke of the fires, which were necessary for cooking purposes.

A number of pack-mules had been driven along by the outlaws, loaded with all that was required in camp. Everything was soon carried up to the caverns and arranged in order, there being also some extra weapons.

Previous to the departure of the Bandit Queen she had collected all the gold in the possession of her own gang, and had passed her sombrero around to collect more from the white bandits; asserting that she had a game of her own to play in conjunction with the other business.

From Buck Bradley she obtained a considerable sum, as also from Captain Hold-up; the latter informing Buck that the Mexican woman must be humored, as it was dangerous to cross her in any of her pet schemes. This, the band well knew.

Her little daughter was almost worshiped by even the worst of those crime-stained Mexicans; and the white outlaws, although they had not known her long, made a pet of Paquita. Consequently all were astonished, and not a little anxious in regard to the child's safety, when Donna Diablo announced that Paquita was to go with her to Nugget Notch.

But none dared remonstrate in words.

They knew that it would be worse than useless. It would only madden the human tigress, and not in any manner change her purpose. Go she must.

It appeared very strange to all, and seemed wrong and unnatural in the mother to have that innocent child accompany her. But some of the

Greasers remembered that Donna Diablo had frequently done so on former occasions; and that she had been, more than once, saved from death by the presence of her little daughter.

The bandits had, since Paquita had been with them, refrained from using vulgar or profane language in the child's presence as much as possible. Bad though they were, Paquita held a good influence over them.

But, not one among the whites was there, who did not wish it was in his power to place the child where she could be properly trained and cared for. All thought it the worst crime Donna Diablo was ever guilty of—and that was saying much—to permit her innocent little girl to remain among such a lawless and criminal band away from those of her own age, and surrounded by influences that would tend to make her, in time, perhaps as bad as her mother.

Captain Hold-up knew the history of Donna and her child, and had told it to all the members of his band; how that the little girl's father was a square white man, who, but a few years before, had been a wealthy mine-owner at Santa Rita.

He had become infatuated with Donna Diablo when the latter was a young and lovely senorita, and of good and respectable parents.

She had, however, an uncontrollable passion for gambling, which Rita Roy—for by that name her husband was known—knew nothing of until after their marriage. She had ruined him financially, and had, in addition to that, several times attempted his life, he having been compelled to leave her when she became known as "crooked."

The child had been at different times in possession of each, but upon the last occasion of Donna's regaining Paquita by strategy, she had sworn by all the saints, and fiends into the bargain, that she would kill Rita Roy if he ever again attempted to lay hands on the little one.

As a matter of course, Captain Hold-up and Buck Bradley were very anxious in regard to the result of the Bandit Queen's mission, and they both sat up that night drinking and smoking, and revolving in their minds what the next move should be if this of Donna's proved a failure.

They resolved not to go to rest until the Mexican woman returned.

Buck Bradley would have been surprised and rejoiced had he known that in a like series of caverns on the opposite side of the range dwelt the man he was in search of; indeed, to get Meta and Merle Montrose into his power would avail him nothing unless he could find their uncle Maurice—the one man now living who could tell where the chest of gold had been buried by the father of Merle and Meta.

For the Wild Man of the Mogollon Mountains was none other than the much-wronged Maurice Montrose, driven to insanity and the life of a savage recluse through the machinations of Louis La Croix, now known as Buck Bradley, and his infamous mother.

The latter, as Meta had stated to Prentiss Pierce, having married and ruined Maurice, poisoned his idolized and only daughter, and then caused the wretched man to believe that he himself had accidentally administered the fatal dose to his child!

CHAPTER XX.

REPORTING FAVORABLY.

WHEN Donna Diablo whirled her horse and sped from between the shanties she was in the bright moonlight, and could not distinguish who the two enemies were who were cutting her off from the pines.

She had been lassoed by Nonita from the rear, and therefore knew not who it was that had jerked her from her horse.

After her momentary stunned state, when she had freed herself from the rope, signaled her horse and sprung upon the animal, it was only by a powerful effort of will that she controlled herself sufficiently to shoot. It was only then that she recognized the Navajo maiden.

The Bandit Queen had known of the young squaw at Tombstone, but did not in any way connect her with Peapod, and when she now leveled and fired at Nonita's companion, she knew him not, for his back was toward her.

Not until later did Donna Diablo discover that the man she had shot—she hoped fatally—was the very person whom she had thought to meet and infatuate in Nugget Notch. Had not her black steed taken the bit between his teeth and bounded madly from the plaza, she would have risked her life to ascertain if she had given Peapod a mortal wound.

When she realized that she was safe, and had a moment for reflection, she congratulated herself that the mask had not become detached from her face, for if the professor was not mortally wounded she might still entertain hope of winning his love.

Her opinion of Peapod had been mostly formed from hearing others speak of him and his deeds; and for the reason that she knew he would hate and despise her as Donna Diablo, she loved him the more. She had vowed to win him, but not as the Outlaw Queen would she try that game.

Never before, since she had been leading the

life of a bandit, had she shown her face in public, and her very reason for so doing in Bugle-paint Bazaar had been with the hope that Peapod would be there.

She had promised herself that she would refrain from gaming if he should happen to be present, that she would give no cause for him or others to suspect her of anything wrong except a love of freedom, and the privilege of wearing what she chose.

But, as he had not been there she had made things lively, played her game, and literally swept the board.

If it should now happen that Peapod had been slain by her hand, she swore, as she was being borne away by her horse, that she would not long survive him, even though she should be forced to take her own life. But then, he could not be dead. She had hoped it might be so before she had recognized him, but she had had no reason for believing such to be the case.

Very possibly, he was only slightly wounded. He would live, and would one day be hers—hers to love, and be loved by!

Hope dawned in her breast.

She heeded not the terrible curses of the few followers that remained to her. A short halt was made at a motte of pines, at the base of the wall of the Notch. There she bade them bide their time, telling them that vengeance should be theirs. Here, one of the Greasers dismounted, entering the shades.

He soon returned, leading a horse upon which a man was bound—a man with bent form and long gray hair. It was Old Mystery, as the miners called him.

The wretched captive made touching appeals to be set free, but these were unnoticed. The cavalcade sped on down the Notch, one of the bandits leading the horse to the back of which Old Mystery was bound. When clear of the Notch, Donna Diablo turned her horse between the foot-hills and galloped at full speed up along the foot of the range.

She could scarce control her fury, and her thirst for revenge upon the men of Nugget Notch for the death of so many of her followers, and the loss of Paquita. But she blamed Peapod for nothing; she banished all thought of his having been the cause of the death of her men.

She vowed that she would recover Paquita, and felt the greatest exultation at having shot Rita Rob, thus keeping her vow in that particular. That she had killed her husband she entertained not the slightest doubt.

Not one thought had the bandit queen of the gold she had won. It was only as the gulch was reached that it occurred to her.

She knew that her white confederates would be disappointed that she had not captured Bill Bradley; but the money she had won, and which she intended to divide equally among the band, would, she knew, outweigh all.

All would, she felt, be greatly enraged when they heard that Paquita had been captured, and was lost to them; but she saw that even this would be in her favor, for she could, at any time, get the white outlaws to aid her in rescuing her child, as well as in performing other acts she might decide upon, and which would necessitate another visit to Nugget Notch.

Donna Diablo's mind was busy during that night ride to the cave.

She resolved to concoct a plot, through the accomplishment of which she could count upon winning the gratitude of Peapod.

She cared little for the plans and schemes of Buck Bradley, except that, through them, she might be able the better to further her own aims.

Upon arriving at the big gorge, the guards were passed, and soon the Bandit Queen had dismounted at the foot of the shelf, in the natural corral, above which was the outlaws' cavern.

Her horse was taken in charge by one of the Greasers, and another bore the bag of gold, the last following her up to the cave.

The Mexicans, who had remained behind, and the white outlaws as well, were soon in possession of the facts connected with the expedition, and great was the surprise manifested at the daring and reckless manner in which Donna Diablo had acted. The loss of Paquita caused some excitement, and many oaths were made to rescue the little one, all forgetting the fact that she was now in far better hands than with them.

The whole band congregated at the foot of the shelf to question the Greasers who had been in the fight, and comment upon the probable result. Many were of the opinion that an organized raid would be made upon them.

Others, however, reasoned that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to trail them over the rocky ground; and, even should their stronghold be discovered, they could, with ease, defend themselves against a strong force. They had little fear, therefore, on that score.

Captain Hold-up and Buck Bradley welcomed Donna Diablo warmly, and expressed great curiosity to know the result of her trip.

At a gesture from the Bandit Queen, the Mexican laid the bag of gold at her feet, made a profound salutation, and then withdrew from the cave-chamber.

Buck and the captain could not but notice

that their female ally had lost her sombrero, that her clothing was soiled, and her long hair in a very disheveled state. But they both knew better than to question her.

They also knew that the bag of coin was very heavy, that it was at least four times more in value than the one she had taken away with her from the cave. They were, therefore, extremely impatient to hear her story.

Hold-up made a covert gesture to Buck Bradley, in impressing the importance of silence upon the latter; which was very necessary, for that worthy was on thorns, so to speak, so great was his suspense.

The Outlaw Queen had given orders that Old Mystery should be taken from the horse, and conducted to the entrance of the caverns by one of her men, who was to await further instructions in regard to him.

Upon entering the cave, she had walked straight to the rude table, which her men had formed of saplings, and had helped herself to a drink of brandy; and that, without addressing a word to any one, or even noticing Hold-up and Bradley, excepting a glance.

After drinking, she nervously rolled a shuck cigarette, and lighting it at a candle, seated herself upon the table; blowing the smoke from her nostrils, with every sign of enjoying it, the tobacco evidently calming her.

For a few moments she sat thus, the men eyeing her; she being obviously pleased at their not having bothered her with questions.

Then she spread a blanket upon the table, replaced the candles, and, taking the bag of coin, emptied the glittering gold and silver in a heap, in the middle of the table.

Both men sprung from their reclining positions, and, as they got a plain sight of the money, they gave utterance to their great joy and astonishment.

"There, pard," said Donna Diablo, exultantly; "there is all the money of the gamblers of Nugget Notch. I broke every confounded bank, and gained the name of the Monte Queen. I renounced that, however, and sailed in as the Bandit Queen, and lost a man for every bank I broke, besides losing Paquita."

Hold-up and Buck gazed at the Mexican woman in wonder, not unmixed with apprehension in connection with the events she had mentioned.

Her astounding assertions rendered them, for the moment, speechless.

"There's been the very deuce to pay in Nugget Notch to-night," she continued. "I broke up the town, and don't you believe there's any discount on it. I'll give it to you, plain and straight, in a few words."

She then related all that had occurred, even to the shooting of Nonita and Peaped; and, as she ended, she gave a low signal.

This brought her Mexican follower, leading in Old Mystery.

Buck Bradley was now wild with joy and triumph. He exclaimed:

"You're the most wonderful woman in the world, Donna Diablo! You have accomplished more in one night than we all could in a week. By Heavens, you are a queen, and no mistake!"

"Now, all is clear. Peapod and that squaw being out of our way is a big thing. Besides, you have here the man who can inform us where Maurice Montrose is."

"I don't believe Bill Bradley is dead. He had nothing to do with the Apaches. We'll have him soon, and will scoop in Meta on that stage. Then our complete racket will be worked. Hurrah for Donna Diablo, the Queen of all bandits!"

Old Mystery was conducted to a separate room and a guard placed over him.

Captain Hold-up was jubilant, and the trio had a drink together, agreeing to hold a council in the morning, in regard to future operations.

The winnings of the Monte Queen were returned to the bag, and Donna Diablo took charge of it herself; declaring her intention of dividing it, in the morning, among the men of both bands.

Then all retired, to rest from their fatigue, and strengthen themselves with much needed sleep.

CHAPTER XXI.

"HE COMETH NOT" SHE SAID.

RITA ROY arose from the bench upon which he was seated, when Peapod entered, and extended his hand. The latter was greatly surprised at the tableau before him, but it was soon explained by the father of little Paquita, who was now in Nonita's arms.

This explanation caused the professor still greater surprise. Indeed, he was astonished; for he had heard of Rita Roy, and the circumstances that followed his unfortunate marriage, but he did not know that the woman in question was now the notorious leader of a band of Mexican outlaws. Neither had he the least idea that she would have attempted to shoot the father, when their little daughter was clasped in his arms.

There could be no stronger proof of the heartless depravity, and tiger-like longing for revenge, that was in her nature, than this event;

and, that she had brought her innocent child among such a desperate gang of outlaws, also proved her less than human. Peapod congratulated Rita Roy upon his escape, and for having regained possession of his child.

Then, knowing that the miners would soon crowd the bar, he asked Nonita to guide him to the cabin, through the window of which she had seen Buck Bradley, on the night that she rode through the Notch, on her way to Tucson. Entering the but, Peapod struck a match, and, finding a candle, ignited it. The room, which comprised the entire dwelling, was comfortably furnished.

There were two roomy bunks, with an abundance of blankets, and the Indian girl placed Paquita in one of them, bidding her sleep. Peapod looked anxious.

"Pardon me, pard," he said to Rita Roy, "but you are posted in this particular point, I presume, as you're a permanent pilgrim?"

"Yes, I live here, when at home," was the reply. "I know the two young men who occupy this cabin. They are said to be brothers, but I don't know how that may be. They are not alike in any respect."

"I came down range to-day, and discovered half a dozen dead Apaches about ten miles above the Notch. They had been killed in a fight, I should judge, about a week ago. When I arrived at Nugget Notch to-night, and reported, asking if any one was missing, I was told that the Bradley brothers—so they were called—had not been seen about the Notch in the past week."

"You see they have not returned. I think it very probable they have been killed, or else are captives to the Apaches."

Nonita listened eagerly to every word.

She gave not the slightest sign of what her feelings must have been.

She had not expected to meet Merle when she entered the cabin, for she thought it probable that he was with the miners; but she had never dreamed of his being absent from the town.

When Merle had so mysteriously disappeared while she had been absent at the spring to procure water, her belief was that he had regained consciousness, and had, in a semi-lazed state, wandered back to Nugget Notch. It now seemed that such had not been the case.

What then had become of him?

Was he dead?

Could it be that other Apaches had been in the rear of the party, and that Merle had been taken by them and carried off?

The thought was terrible to Nonita.

If Merle was now dead, she was the cause.

She resolved that she would not sleep until she had learned something in regard to him. Indeed, she knew she could not sleep.

Peapod could see that this news had driven the Navajo maiden nearly wild with concern and anguish. He had noticed her closely, when Merle Montrose had been the subject of conversation, and he felt assured of the true state of her feelings.

Both Nonita and Peapod were aware, of course, of the true cause of Buck Bradley's absence. They had no doubt that he had joined the bandits at some point up the range, and that Donna Diablo had left the band for the purpose of capturing Merle at Nugget Notch, and that on Buck's suggestion.

Peapod had been surprised at the style and manner of Rita Roy's speaking, which proved him far above the general run of the men of the mines in education and associations.

"Pard Roy," he said, after having reflected for a moment or two; "your news is somewhat perplexing. As to that perfidious pirate, Buck Bradley, his absence from this palace of his is plain; but Nonita and I have had our peepers on him."

"He is now a parasite of Donna Diablo. That pretty pilgrim is on the predatory, being under orders from the perfidious Captain Hold-up; having promised to procure Bill Bradley, whose real name is Merle Montrose, in *propria persona*."

"There's a plot in progress, you perceive; and the next procedure on the programme, is for us to produce and protect the said Merle. He must be found—that's positive!"

"We'll prolong our trail over the prairies, until we put our paws upon him. That is, Nonita and I will thus propel ourselves. You must remain, and protect the pretty little Paquita. In fact, you are pretty well played out, as it is."

The Navajo maiden had already reached the door. She was rejoiced to learn from the professor, that they were now to search for Merle.

Rita Roy, although he had heard much of Peapod's peculiarities, was both surprised and amused at the style of speech of the latter; who had, while making the above statement, seemed to be in deep thought—his tongue articulating, as it were, of its own volition. He was, evidently, filled with conjectures as to the cause of Merle's having so mysteriously disappeared.

"Thanks for your kind consideration," returned Rita Roy; "I am rather under the weather, and my wound pains me somewhat. Besides, I do not wish to leave my child."

"I hope to be able to assist you, in the morning, and shall not detain you longer at present."

You may have more information for me by to-morrow."

"Perhaps," was the reply. "I hope we shall be able to produce the party by that time. Good-night, and peaceful slumbers!"

Our two friends went out, closing the door.

They walked into the shadows in the rear of the shanties. Then the professor spoke.

"Well, my pretty Pink of Perfection, this is peculiarly perplexing, is it not? I dare not think of Merle. It would kill her to know it."

"It was fortunate she did not accompany us. Can you, in any way, account for Merle's disappearance?"

"I told you, Peapod, how I left him. He must have been captured by Apaches, while he lay senseless. I will go to the great gorge again to-night. I could not sleep. My head is wild."

By this time, the mob had hanged the two Greaser outlaws, and were returning toward the town, as noisy as ever.

But, through the yells they gave, was heard a piercing and unearthly shriek; the same seeming to proceed from Buglepaint Bazaar. The pair remained silent, listening for a repetition of the unaccountable cry.

They heard nothing further.

Peapod was about to speak, when the rush of some object toward them caused him to jerk his revolver. The next minute, bounding high in air, over rocks and cacti, and dashing through the small pines in his path, sprung a frightful object in the shape and form of a man.

It was of huge stature, had long and tangled hair, and was partly clothed in tattered skins.

The moonlight plainly revealed him.

In one of his hands, this strange creature clutched a large demijohn, which he bore apparently with much care.

Almost directly to the spot where our two friends stood, came the weird being, on the run, and Peapod instinctively raised his pistol; but the young squaw sprung forward, and forced his arm down, saying, in a low voice:

"Don't shoot! It is the Wild Man."

Peapod made no answer.

He was unable to do so, for he was thunder-struck at the fearful aspect and wild form that shot toward them at such a rate, and following a course that was perilous to life and limb.

The explanation of Nonita was no explanation to him whatever.

True he had heard of this unfortunate being, but he did not recall it now.

On, past the pair, sped the Wild Man; his eyes glaring, while he, now and then, darted glances over either shoulder, on the back trail.

Soon he was lost to view, speeding toward the wall of the Notch.

Just then terrific yells and whoops sounded from Buglepaint Bazaar.

The crowd had returned from the hanging, but Peapod knew they must have discovered something to astonish, or affect them wonderfully. It must, he imagined, be something in connection with the Wild Man, who had just left the Bazaar.

Then, he remembered Nonita's narrative, of how she had been borne to the cave of this crazed being, when insensible; after having discovered that Merle had disappeared.

She had told this to him, wishing him to know every circumstance connected with the fight, and the subsequent vanishing of her rescuer.

The recalling of her story by the professor, caused a new thought to flash through his mind.

He instantly decided, that the Wild Man of the Mountains had something to do with the disappearance of Merle Montrose.

This was terrible to think of even, and he did not dare reveal his suspicions to his companion.

That frightful shriek again sounded—this time from up the Notch wall.

The sound drew the mob from Buglepaint Bazaar, and the gaze of Peapod and Nonita toward the range.

All stared, dumfounded at the strange and terrible sight.

The Wild Man, with demijohn whirling about his head, was dancing and yelling on the very tree-trunk from which the corpses of the two Mexican bandits were suspended!

The tree was swaying and tilting up and down over that dizzy height.

All gazed, silent and spellbound.

This lasted only for a minute.

Then, a blade flashed in the moonlight, and the Wild Man, with a most unearthly yell, stooped and cut the rope which held one of the corpses.

Down shot the fearful thing through the air, and the sickening sound as it struck the rocks below was heard by all!

Again bent the mountain maniac, and the remaining body cut the air. Then, with another fearful cry, he bounded from the trembling tree-trunk, which, by the force expended upon it, now cracked at the roots, hung for a moment, and then also shot down the dizzy height—striking the rocks with a crashing sound as it splintered into many pieces.

And up the rock wall, soon vanishing from view by a course which no man saw him dared follow, went the Wild Man of the Mogollon Mountains!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BUSTLE AT THE BAZAAR.

WHEN Peapod with Nonita, Rita Roy and Paquita left the hotel to go to the cabin of the Bradleys, Big Bugle had been left, truly monarch of all he surveyed.

The landlord was in a very greatly infuriated state of mind.

In the *melee*, his nose, that most prominent feature, had come to grief. Donna Diablo had shot so close that the bullet had grazed it, and the consequent flow of blood had been considerable, and the fright still greater. Never since he had opened Buglepaint Bazaar had he been left entirely alone, as he now found himself.

He proceeded, however, to brace himself in his accustomed manner, but here too, he was unfortunate. Only a part of the generous libation, which he poured out for himself, went on the course he intended. The liquor nearly strangled him, throwing him into convulsions, his arms thrashing about wildly, dislodging glasses and decanters, which came crashing from the bar shelves to the floor.

Gaining his equilibrium presently, he clutched a broom and viciously swept away the broken glass from behind the bar, his nose still bleeding profusely.

He then took a view of himself in the mirror.

"Dunder und blitzen!" he burst out. "Hunderd tusan' tuyvels! Vot vill I make mit myself, schtaying owit here on dose vild porder? Dot Nugget Nodge vos von hell of a place to lo-gate mit. Tonna Tiablo, she first schnaps her vip on mine nose, but I makes dot all right ven she blanks down dot goldt. Den she vos preaks all dose monte-panks, und dot shoot preaks up mine leetle pizness already."

"She baints dot purg red, und baints me redder as never vos. I not for can recognize myself. Dose porder gountries vos blayed owit. Dot vos so."

"I dinks, ven I makes pig moneys, I seddles down 'mong der Sehtates und dakes one frow to myself; but, Gott in Himmel! if I gets von blayed-out ole Biute squaw, vile I looks like dot I vos lucky. My head vos vild mit all der—"

Big Bugle might have proceeded further in his soliloquy, but he was brought to a pause suddenly. His eye had again caught the mirror, in his speculations as to the possibility of his remaining personal charms being sufficient to captivate a Piute squaw. The reflection he saw therein was fearful. He dared not think it was real.

He was fairly paralyzed at the sight.

The glass showed, standing in the doorway, the Wild Man of the Mountains.

This strange being presented an appearance more terrible than ever. His eyes were wilder and more bloodshot, his face was flushed, and his expression betrayed an insane eagerness for liquor.

One look of surprise he directed to Big Bugle, and then his glance swept the room. There was, evidently, method in his madness, as was soon proven.

On his former visit he had carried away a decanter of whisky, and he had, it appeared, decided to go deeper this trip. With one mad bound he sprung upon the bar, directly in the rear of Big Bugle.

The arms and claw-like hands of the Wild Man were out-tretched to clutch the head of the landlord, when the latter gave out a wild scream of terror, with all the energy he could command. As he did so he made a frantic spring to escape from the clutch of the maniac and from behind the bar; but he fell to the floor, where he lay senseless.

The Wild Man caught up a demijohn, made sure that it was full, sampled it by a big drink, and then bounded away from the hotel to the rear of the shanties and toward the towering wall of the Notch, avoiding, in his way, the crowd of miners, thus necessitating a detour, which brought him near Peapod and Nonita, as we have seen.

The miners had been but a short distance from Buglepaint Bazaar when the shriek of the landlord caused them to hasten, indeed, to rush in a stampede toward the hotel, many being hurled against the sides of the rear entrance in the headlong rush, and others stumbling and falling, to be trampled upon by those behind them.

The Wild Man had cunningly kept himself screened from the mob, by a line of dwarf pine trees; otherwise, there would have been a fierce pursuit by all in the burg.

Through the large room, the crowd rushed, with eyes bent ahead; all under the impression that another tragic event had happened. They had left Rita Roy, with the young squaw and the child, in the bar-room; and the hero of the night, Peapod, was seated on the piazza, when they had dragged the Greasers to execution. They had thought of naught else at the time.

After the Mexicans had been hanged, there was not a man in the crowd, who did not feel ashamed and self-condemned, at having, in the excitement, neglected to attend to the wounded. None had known who the man was, that had exhibited such remarkable skill and bravery.

Few among them had seen his face; and, such had been their mad fury, that he had been left

to himself. Those who had, while rushing to the scene, cast glances of admiration and respect at the professor; especially after they had discovered the two bandits, and were dragging them away, when they saw him coolly cutting the bullets from his arm, less excited than any among them.

Boss Blazer had been the only one who had spoken to Peapod, and the sheriff had never seen him before, although he knew him by reputation. All had supposed that the stranger would proceed to the hotel; as the squaw, who had accompanied him to the town, was there, and had also been wounded.

It was not to be wondered at, therefore, that they associated the shriek which they had heard, with those whom they had left at Buglepaint Bazaar.

But, when the foremost in the rush saw that the parties they had left there were gone; then, indeed, were they frantic. Their first thought was, that the bandits had returned, and carried off those whom they should have attended and protected, in place of allowing their fierce passion to rule them in such a prompt lynching of the outlaws.

They ought to have waited, until they had first attended to the wounded.

Thus many among them reasoned.

Then they perceived Big Bugle, senseless and bleeding, lying upon the floor; while the broken bottles and glasses indicated that there had been a struggle for life.

At first, all believed him dead; and he came near being crushed as the crowd pressed forward. Fierce oaths and yells were uttered.

However, no wound was found upon the unconscious landlord, except that upon his nose; and he presented such a comical appearance, that, in spite of their fierce emotions and excitement, many were forced to laugh aloud, although deplorable and frightful was the hapless German's appearance, as well as absurdly ridiculous.

The hurried report of Big Bugle's condition had just been made, when the awful yells of the Wild Man, as he stood upon the decayed tree far up the Notch, electrified the mob once more; and they rushed back, and out at the rear entrance, to gaze upon the most startling and astonishing spectacle they had yet seen.

They perceived the demijohn, and recalling the previous visit of the maniac of the mountains to the Bazaar, when he had appropriated a decanter of whisky, they at once comprehended the cause of the breakage behind the bar, and why the valiant Boniface was insensible.

Still, the absence of the strangers remained an unexplained mystery.

They gazed spellbound, and shuddered as the Greasers were cut loose from the tree, and sent down the awful chasm, all expecting each instant to see the tree, with the Wild Man upon it, follow the corpses, and he be hurled to death before their eyes.

The tree did fall, as has been stated, but the crazed being sprung from it, in time to save himself, and was soon out of their sight up the Notch.

The citizens of the burg all drew long breaths of relief, and stared one at another, still impressed by the dread spectacle they had just witnessed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FINDING A CLEW.

"MAY the devil fly away with that Wild Man! He has brought bad luck to the burg. Can't we corral the critter?"

Thus exclaimed one of the monte-dealers, all of whom, to their sorrow, had been flat broke by the Bandit Queen.

The miners, and the rabble generally, however, had little or no sympathy for the "card-flippers," as they considered the latter fools, to have allowed it to go on after the first two banks had been broken.

Somebody of much greater importance occupied their minds.

"Whar's ther pilgrim what laid out ther pepper-eaters?"

"Whar's thet squaw what's white clean through?"

"Whar's ther leetle gal an' Rita Roy?"

"We-uns warn't half-human fer ter leave them thet-a-way."

"We'll find em', er split ther range!"

"What's become o' ther XXX pilgrim?"

"Hunt em' all up, boyees!"

"Jist so. 'Rah fer ther Notch!"

"'Rah fer ther pilgrim what furnished game fer ther lynch pic-nic, an' laid out Donna Diablo's Greasers!"

These and like wild outcries now filled the air around the hotel.

Then a rush was made by Boss Blazer back into Buglepaint Bazaar.

They were bent on bringing the landlord back to his senses, and getting him to explain the absence of those about whom they were so anxious. But Boss Blazer halted, as did those with him, and the hindermost closed up; the crowd filling the immense apartment.

There was relief upon every face, for Pea-

pod and Nonita stood side by side, facing the surprised denizens of the town. Our two friends had but just put in an appearance.

There they stood, presenting an imposing picture. A man of splendid physique, and handsome face beaming with good will, and an Indian maiden, pretty, and tastefully attired.

One rousing cheer of joyous welcome and relief burst simultaneously from the crowd. Then all became hushed at a wave of the hand from the sheriff; for Peapod, doffing his sombrero, was about to speak.

"Pards of Nugget Notch," he said, in a clear and mellow voice, "put me down as presumer on your patience, if you please. Permit me, first, to present to you my pretty Pink of Perfection, Nonita, the Navajo. She's a pansy, she is. It was she who brought that female pirate prone to the plaza; and it was no fault of hers that Donna Diablo precipitated from this precinct without pursuit, as I presume you know."

"Now, for myself. I'm known somewhat in some precincts. I'm a predestined paralyzer of prairie and peak pirates. I don't claim to be a prince or a paragon, but I am generally prepared to pulverize any pestiferous pepper-eating pirate who may parade too publicly."

Here, the professor was forced to stop; for, deafening cheers for the "Prince of Pan-Out" fairly caused the building to tremble. As the sounds filled Buglepaint Bazaar, the landlord, who must have thought they proceeded from the last trumpet, regained consciousness.

He sprung to his feet, and dashed blindly forward; not knowing where he was, or whither he was going. But, as it happened, he headed for the crowd, and was seized by Boss Blazer; who held him, while he called out—

"Silence, pards!"

And silent all became.

Not a word, that Peapod chose to speak, did they care to miss.

"Nonita and yours particularly," he went on, "permanently pointed for this purlieu, for the purpose of holding a parley with you; having found out that the peak pirates were coming this way. It appears they preceded us."

"There are more of them, up the range; two gangs, planning to capture a pard of mine. You know him by the name of Bill Bradley—Buck Bradley, who pretends to be a brother of Bill, is seeking my pard's ruin; having perverted him by drink, for a purpose of his own."

"Buck and Bill, so Rita Roy tells me, disappeared from this precinct a week ago. We came from Tucson—Buck Bradley was there, and we tumbled to his whole game."

"But Bill is not to be found. We shall proceed to find him, if alive, and protect him. It was he who rescued Nonita from the Apaches, who are now lying dead, up-range."

"I'm Peapod, as you perceive, and I never prevaricate. No Apaches took Bill, or they would have buried their dead; for my pard neglected to peel their pates. I'm perplexed in this hunt, but I'll persevere."

"Pards, there are going to be peppery times in these parts, or I'm prevaricating. Perhaps I have been too prolix, so I'll come to a point; for, I perceive somebody has been practicing on our host's proboscis."

"Pilgrims, we'll proceed to poison ourselves, without further procrastination, if there is any prospect of the proprietor being able to propel the crystals. Presto!"

As he uttered the last word, the professor stepped to the bar, and brought his fist hard down, with a bang, to give the climax to his address.

Again, Buglepaint Bazaar rung with the most hearty cheers that had ever been heard in the town; sombreros filling the air, and flying hither and thither—the owners, in their jubilation, not caring, as it seemed, whether they recovered their own, or in fact any headgear whatever.

Quite as joyous and happy were the men of the Notch, as they had, but a short time previous, been furious and bloodthirsty.

Big Bugle recovered rapidly, as soon as he realized fully the state of affairs around them; the order of a general treat, by Peapod, going far toward bringing him around to business. The comical appearance of the landlord added to the mirth that now prevailed.

As soon as the cheers had subsided, the sheriff strode forward, and grasped a hand of both Nonita and the professor; shaking them warmly, and saying, while the crowd drew around and listened:

"We-uns o' Nugget Notch welcomes yer, free an' hearty. Ye're, both o' yer, hummers from Cyclone City. Yer run in on us, an' we-uns stood, like a pack o' idgets, gazin' at ther cussed Greasers, an' that shemale pirut, while they skuted from our burg, takin' all ther dust wi' them."

"She's a roarer, that Donna Diablo—she air! She jist bamboozled ther hull on us. We're or-mighty much 'bleeged ter yer, fer comin' ter tell we-uns 'bout ther cussed road-agents, an' thet Buck Bradley war in wi' them."

"We doesn't know whar Bill air, but we'll help yer ter nose aroun' on ther hunt fer him."

He's a squar' pilgrim, I reckon, only he's got a strong appertite fer bug-juice ter sot him back.

"We'll give ther crooked cusses a hot row ter hoe, ef we kin root 'em out—yer jist kin gamble on that. We've been all broke up by ther cussedness we've hed piled onter us ter-night—ther Wile Man bein' ther last on ther p'ogramme. He nighly settled Big Bugle's hash, I reckon. Ther lan'lord air 'bout ther wu'stest used-up galoot not ter be cut deep, I ever see'd."

"But, whar in the dickens air Rita Roy, an' his leetle gal? We-uns thought ther pirates hed corral'd yer all, while we war hangin' ther two Greasers."

"Rita Roy and Paquita," Peapod answered, "are in the palatial abode of the Bradley brothers; piled in on pallets, to rest their peepers."

Boss Blazer had now resumed his position behind the bar, and was staring in wonder and admiration at the professor and the Navajo maiden; doubtless deciding that, if he should be forced to put up with a squaw for a help-meet, Nonita would not be so much amiss after all.

He instinctively felt of his nose, and thrust his finger tips through the bullet-holes in his ears; as if to assure himself that he was himself, so strange and frightful had been his experiences of the night.

After informing the sheriff, that he wished to confer with him in private, and explain more particularly the state of affairs with reference to the bandits, and the plot of Buck Bradley; Peapod, with a smile turned to Big Bugle, saying, as he tapped the counter somewhat vigorously:

"Proceed, pard, to produce the poison; for the pilgrims are anxious to pour it down. We don't propose to paralyze ourselves, and there is no danger, unless you propel your person more precipitately. But, I presume, your ideas are a little promiscuous, perhaps preternatural, after what you experienced from that pirate in petticoats."

The crowd roared with laughter, and Boss Blazer stepped aside, to give the landlord a hint to hurry himself. The miners pressed forward to shake hands with the man who had won their respect and admiration by his skill and bravery.

Then they brought to the front their better nature, causing them to overflow with mirth at the stranger's peculiar speech, as well as his winning ways and appearance.

Nonita was not forgotten in the hand-shaking, although she no doubt regretted very much that she had not been; for she was, evidently, far from feeling at ease in such a crowd, and her hand was squeezed perhaps more energetically than the occasion called for.

But she would not leave Peapod, and to be near him, especially when she depended so much on him in helping to find Merle, she was willing to bear much that was disagreeable.

Under the circumstances, it was not strange that the miners were proud of the presence in their burg of such a pair; indeed, they were delighted beyond measure, and also at having Paquita, who was now sleeping in one of the cabins.

Truly, the night had proved to be the most eventful in the history of the town.

Big Bugle managed to wait on his many customers, and all drank to the brave and the fair. Then the landlord, to the astonishment of all, "set 'em up" himself, with the following remarks:

"Bilgrims an' bards,"—he had, it was evident, caught some of the professor's style—"I vos so clad to be alive myselluf, und dot mine nose vos not all plowed away already, dot I dreats dot growd."

"I don't vos care you all bours owit four fingers. Dot vos all right-ut. Dunder und blitzen! Dot Tonna Tiablo vos von duff bill to dake, dot vos so; und dot Vile Mans"—with a shudder—"Mein Gott in Himmel! He just vill preak up mine pizness."

"I shtays not here by mineselluf again, not mooch. Py shiminy! I puyes me von six-bound gannon, und puts it in pehind dot par. Hcw vos dot?"

As Big Bugle had not placed the bottles on the bar for his treat, there was no confusion while he spoke; indeed the crowd were remarkably silent, and drank in his words, with almost as much pleasure and enjoyment as they would his whisky.

When he ended they were all convulsed with laughter at his appearance and words.

Nonita was very impatient at this delay. She was very eager to learn something in connection with Merle, as was but natural.

Peapod was fully as anxious, but he entertained a suspicion that the Wild Man was responsible for the disappearance of Merle Montrose.

He, therefore, with the sheriff, and followed by the Indian maiden, proceeded to the cabin of Boss Blazer. The professor began:

"I want to put one question, sheriff. Did this Wild Man ever steal whisky before?"

"Ya-as, jist once," was the reply. "Thet war three days ago, I reckon. Ya-as, I'm sartain."

"That's all I want to know, then. I think I have a clew. Nonita, it will be better for you to

retire. You can pass the night with Paquita. I want to ponder and plan particularly. I am positive I can find Merle, so you can rest easy on that subject."

Without a word the young squaw passed out of the cabin, perfectly satisfied.

She had the utmost confidence in her white brother, as she called him; and knew he would not speak as he had without good grounds. She saw, by Peapod's manner, that he had formed a theory as to the disappearance of Merle Montrose which he considered was based upon fact.

But as yet it had not occurred to her that the Wild Man of the Mogollons could have had anything to do with the affair. She knew also that it would be useless to seek "sign" until daylight. Besides this, she was worn and weary, and did what was best—that is, obeyed the request of Peapod.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WITH THE POSSESSED.

WHEN poor Merle Montrose had succeeded in making his crazed keeper understand what it was he so much craved, we have seen how prompt the Wild Man was in obtaining it.

But the reader has yet to be informed of the further happenings at the cave.

The experience of Merle had been truly horrible. But, with all his sufferings, it would have been far better for the young man had he not succeeded in making his jailer understand that he wanted his brain and antidote.

To explain, however.

On his way back to the cavern, with the decanter, the Wild Man seated himself upon a rock, and very naturally proceeded to examine his prize. He held it up between his face and the moonlight, and shook it vigorously.

But this did not seem to satisfy him.

That decanter had something natural about it. It recalled scenes of the long ago.

He removed the stopper, and scented the liquor.

He hesitated no longer. After one swallow, his face presented emotions of joy and pleasure, and his eyes became brighter. The stimulant had affected his brain at once. The craving for it, which had so long lain dormant, now became strong.

The hereditary appetite for strong drink, which had been his, was re-awakened, and he had neither the strength nor the desire to control it. He drank again and again.

In less than five minutes, the Wild Man was speeding up between the foot-hills; leaping madly over every obstruction, and giving out the most fearful yells. Anything more dreadful in appearance in the shape of a human being, it would be difficult to imagine.

He no longer thought of his captive, and the errand on which he had gone to Nugget Notch.

He stopped not, in his mad race, until he reached the scene of Merle's desperate fight with the Apaches.

There the buzzards and coyotes held high carnival. This loathsome and horrid scene had the effect of delighting, and then infuriating the intoxicated lunatic; and, catching up a club, he dashed in among them, braining the coyotes, and knocking to the earth the gorged carrion birds.

For a time, these circled, in a whirlpool, about the Wild Man, while he reigned supreme in that wild and rock-bound gulch.

At length, with a triumphant whoop, he rushed to the spring, at a little distance; and, placing the decanter carefully upon the sward—having, all this time, taken every precaution not to break it—he threw himself upon the ground, and drank freely of the cooling water.

The herculean exertions, made by him in his long mad race, and his wild rush among the wolves and buzzards, had tasked the strange being to the utmost limit of his giant strength. As he drank copiously of the cool spring, a reaction seemed to take place. He caught up the decanter, stole in a listless manner into the pines, and casting himself upon the carpet formed of their needle-like leaves, sunk at once into a deep sleep.

For some two hours this slumber lasted, during which the scene again changed.

The "loafer wolves" began to approach the horrid feast; then, in pairs or singly, the cowardly coyotes sneaked forward, while lower and lower swooped and circled the buzzards.

Then, as previous to the Wild man's advent, a wrangling, snarling and fighting mass covered the ground for a distance around each spot where an Apache had fallen, tearing right and left, while the buzzards, perched on pines and rocks, were cheated of their feast.

As the slumber of the maniac hermit neared its end, other actors appeared upon that terrible stage, in the shape of six more hideously painted Apaches, in search of their brother braves.

Fiend-like in appearance, these red pirates of the plains and mountains rode cautiously up the gorge. Their snake-like eyes shot keen glances ahead, and suspiciously they scrutinized each bush and boulder.

Before reaching the scene of the fight all dismounted from their startled mustangs—the animals having scented the slain and the wolves.

Well did the Apaches know the signification of the sounds they heard.

Half-bent, the savages stole forward.

The wolves sprang, with yelp and snarl in every direction, some running directly over the Wild Man, who clutched one of the brutes in each hand, by a hind leg, and bounded clear of the pines.

Catching sight of the Indians, he hurls first one and then the other full at an Apache, felling each to the ground. The dumfounded braves stood in their tracks a moment in superstitious terror; the two who had been knocked over scrambling to their feet and fleeing, with bated breath, down the ravine.

The Wild Man sprang back into the pines, but instantly emerged again with his huge club, and bounded toward the Apaches. With one terrific whoop, he brought it down upon the skull of a warrior; the others dashing, with yells of horror, down the moonlit gorge.

Halting over the fallen brave but long enough to secure his belt and knife, the Wild Man started in mad pursuit until the foot-hills were reached. Then he paused, with a yell of fury and exultation, as he saw the red-men speeding over the plain.

Then the craving for liquor returned to him, and he sped back to the pines, and securing the decanter again drank deeply. This soon put him into a more frenzied state, which continued until he became exhausted. He then took up his decanter and crawled along the gorge wall to a cavern, where he slept the remainder of the night and far into the following day.

Thus he continued, alternately drinking and sleeping, for two days and nights, before a thought of Merle returned to him.

Nearly all of the whisky was gone.

The maniac hastened to return to his cave, whining and moaning, as he realized that he had so long neglected his sick captive.

Meanwhile, poor Merle had suffered indeed.

His brain was in a terrible state, and he was too weak in body to crawl from his couch. When the Wild Man at length appeared, his wretched captive shrieked again and again, and covered his face with the skins.

The poor crazed being was greatly distressed. Then a happy idea seemed to strike him, and he acted upon it at once. He took up the decanter and shook what remained of the contents near the head of Merle.

Nothing could have been done to more thoroughly strike a thrill of insane joy and relief through the mind of the poor sufferer, than to hear that rippling of the liquor; and, tremblingly, but exerting all his strength, he raised himself, and gazed around in mingled dread and expectation.

The Wild Man held the whisky to the lips of his captive, and watched him while he drank nearly half the residue of it.

Merle Montrose felt like one who had been snatched from scorching flames. His nerves were braced. He gazed at his keeper, in gratitude. The maniac was overjoyed.

Merle now remembered the errand upon which the Wild Man had set out, and began to think that he had really been absent but a short time; though it had appeared to him so protracted on account of his sufferings.

The appetite for liquor was now stronger than ever with the recluse, and he saw that there was but one good drink remaining. He pointed to the decanter, and then in the direction of Nugget Notch.

This pantomime was understood by Merle.

He smiled faintly, and nodded his head.

His brain had been cleared, to a remarkable degree by the liquor; he having been deprived of his accustomed stimulant for so long.

Before the Wild Man left, however, he placed a large quantity of broiled meat, a bag of "hardtack," and a huge gourd full of water by the side of Merle. He then, once more, darted out.

Again he hastened toward Nugget Notch, determined, in his partially sane moments, to secure a much larger quantity of the coveted medicine on this occasion.

As we are aware, he did so; getting possession of a demijohn, with which he escaped, after cutting free the corpses of the Mexicans from the out-jutting tree upon the Notch wall.

But, previous to making his attempt to steal the demijohn, the Wild Man had, for some time, been on the watch.

He had arrived at about the same time as had Donna Diablo, and had secreted himself in such a position, on one side of Buglepaint Bazaar, that he could, with the most perfect safety, peep into the gaming-room and bar through a space between two boards, there being a clump of cedars that grew close up to the building, and within which he crouched.

He saw Donna Diablo break the monte banks, saw the glittering gold and silver raked into the bag; and this awakened another strong desire in his brain, and one that had in former days ruled him to a great extent—that is, the desire for gold.

But this was not as strong as his liking for whisky; and, when the propitious moment arrived, he secured the same, to the great horror and utter demoralization of Big Bugle, to say

nothing of the complete demolishing of so many of his bar ornaments.

Besides these, the maniac had, to his joyous surprise, discovered Nonita, the young squaw whom he had found on the field of the fight, and who had, so soon afterward, vanished from his cavern home.

He now resolved, crazed though he was, that he would capture her, and bear her thither again on the first opportunity.

CHAPTER XXV.

WAITING AND WATCHING.

ALL were astir early in the series of caverns which formed the new "locate" of Captain Hold-up and Donna Diablo, who, after a brief conference, called a general meeting of both bands together in the main cavern.

The captain had no idea what plan the Bandit Queen had in prospect.

As a matter of course, Buck Bradley was present, and a very excited, besides curious, member of the assemblage he was.

He was extremely anxious to interview Old Mystery, and ascertain where Maurice Montrose was; but he feared to put himself forward, especially since he had become more fully acquainted with the choleric character of Donna Diablo.

But he was soon to be relieved, for the latter at once ordered the captive to be brought before her. The poor wretch was accordingly dragged in, terror plainly imprinted upon his pallid features. He was placed directly in front of the two bandit leaders.

All present were masked, and the scene was one calculated to terrify any one placed in the situation of the captive.

"You once told," said the Outlaw Queen, addressing the miserable old man; "you once told a person, whom I will not name, that you knew a man who was known in the States as Maurice Montrose; and that, if he could be made to speak, the hiding-place of an immense amount of coin would be made known."

"You asserted that you had lived in company with Senor Montrose for some time, hoping that in some unguarded moment he would reveal the secret; but that he became insane, and for fear of your life you were forced to leave him. You said, however, that he still remained somewhere in this vicinity, leading a hermit's life. This much we know."

"You lived at the Notch before gold was found there, that you might be near this man; and, if possible, worm the secret from him before he died. You have kept an eye on him for years. You are absent every night, wandering the range, that you may keep watch of the movements of this maniac. His family history is already known to you, for you had his confidence so far."

"Now, tell where this man is to be found, and that within five minutes, or you will be lowered by a rope into a chasm from which it will be impossible for you to escape! Five minutes; remember, Old Mystery!"

Donna Diablo held a tiny time-piece in her hand to mark the passage of the specified probation.

"I'll tell—yes, I'll tell," whined the groveling wretch. "Maurice Montrose is now known as the Wild Man of the Mogollons. He is insane, and lives alone in a cave ten miles up the range from Nugget Notch, on the northeast side. All you have said is true."

"Good for you!" said the Bandit Queen. "So much for that business," and she shot a glance at both Captain Hold-up and Buck Bradley.

"Take him back," she said to the guards; "we may need him at the family gathering. And, even if we do not, he cannot be allowed free range for the present."

So Old Mystery was returned to his prison.

"Now, boys," resumed Donna Diablo, addressing the bandits, "you are aware that I made a ten strike at the Notch last night; or, in other words, I broke all the monte banks—no one having the least suspicion who I was. But they know now."

"After I had swept the boards, I put on my mask, jumped my horse, and gave them all a sight of the Bandit Queen. Paquita was with me, and her father being in the crowd, he sprang and seized the child."

"I shot him, shot the tip off the landlord's nose, and then we scooted across the plaza, being obliged to leave my little girl. We were cut off from the pines by two riders, it being too dark to distinguish who they were. I was lassoed and dragged from my horse; six of my boys being left behind either dead or wounded."

"But I got free of the lasso, gained my saddle once more, and escaped, bringing with me the money. I was sure that I would win, and I made a 'tap' every time they would allow me to do so, and win I did."

"That money, boys, is lucky money, and I propose, if you are willing, to make it win more. There is plenty of 'dust' in Nugget Notch, and the card-slippers I broke will raise a stake by to-night. They'll borrow of Big Bugle, as they call the landlord, if there's a show for a game."

"I suggest that the silver be equally divided among you, and that our pard here, Buck Bradley, enter the town to-night in disguise, and

start a monte bank with the gold. He'll have the biggest pile on his table that they have ever seen in one bank.

"We'll rake in all that comes on the next hearse, and besides there are pilgrims coming every hour, and they are well fixed. We'll clean them out of every ounce of dust at Nugget Notch. What say you, men?"

Wild cheers rung for Donna Diablo, from both the white and yellow bandits.

"Take the gold! Take the gold!" was to be heard on all sides.

Probably no man was ever more dumfounded than was Buck Bradley.

According to his way of thinking, it would be pretty much the same as walking into the wide open jaws of death, for him to enter Nugget Notch, no matter how well he might be disguised; for, having been so intimate with most of the residents, it would be strange if some among them did not detect his real character.

Yet he knew it would be very impolite to refuse; and that great confidence would be placed in him, by intrusting such a large amount of gold in his hands.

It was a great compliment paid him by all present, and he ought to thank them; besides, as they had been, and were, his allies and helpers, it would appear to them strange and cowardly, did he not undertake something in connection with the plans of the company, equally dangerous with what they themselves intended doing.

Some had lost their lives already, by the hands of those who were working against him; and, as all these matters were considered, and quickly, Buck Bradley strove to appear pleased at the proposal of Donna Diablo.

He at once arose, and thanked the bandits for their confidence in him; promising to do his best at raking in the ducats of Nugget Notch.

Then Captain Hold-up addressed both the outlaw bands:

"Boys," he said, in clear, quick voice; "we've got to keep our eyes peeled. The brush our queen had, in the plaza will put the men of the Notch on their guard, and perhaps they may make a raid on us.

"Let Bradley run his bank to-night, and, if things pan out well, to-morrow night also; but some of you must accompany him, and be on hand to protect him and the gold, if any one should tumble to his racket.

"To-morrow night we stop the hearse, go through the passengers, and take a young lady whom we want from the coach, bringing her here. We must then corral that Wild Man, and find Bill Bradley, if he is alive.

"That's our programme. Divide the silver, Donna Diablo—giving my share to the boys, and I presume Buck's, too."

"Certainly!" said the individual referred to. The outlaws gave a cheer.

The bag was produced and the silver sorted from the gold, the former being portioned out equally among the men. They were then dismissed, going to their several duties, the steward issuing a half-pint of whisky to each man.

The three conspirators then retired to an inner cave chamber to confer in regard to the preparations of Buck Bradley for his important and perilous mission.

All knew Buck to be an expert at handling cards, and quite a lucky dealer as well, or they would not have been so willing for him to take the gold.

The conference ended in a decision that Bradley should get himself up in a fancy Mexican suit, with a large sombrero, and be otherwise disguised by a heavy beard, that he should enter the town splendidly mounted, with costly trappings, and with the finest and most richly ornamented arms of Captain Hold-up. He was to pretend to be a wealthy ranchero from the Rio Grande, with a decided *penchant* for cards.

Donna Diablo vowed that if Buck did not win a big stake on the first night she would try another game on the men of the Notch on the following one.

The Mexicans who had secured Old Mystery revealed the fact that there was a cave which could be entered from the back portion of the old man's shanty, this being built against the range. As it was seldom or never visited by the miners, the shanty would, therefore, afford a favorable place for Buck and those who were with him to steal into, if in danger of any kind.

Thus were matters arranged at the cave of the bandits.

At Nugget Notch all the people of the burg had also arisen at an early hour, notwithstanding they had not retired until near morning; and never was there a more jubilant crowd, with the exception of the monte dealers and Big Bugle, than that which flocked to the plaza in front of Buglepaint Bazaar, and gazed out upon a sight that caused them no little pride and gratification.

This was neither more nor less than Peapod, walking up and down with Rita Roy, while Nonita followed, leading the little Paquita by the hand.

The two men waved their sombreros in salutation to the citizens. Rita Roy was looking somewhat pale from loss of blood and the professor

was hardly as fresh and ruddy in appearance as usual.

Boss Blazer joined them, and they conversed together for a few minutes, by which time the trio had agreed upon a programme for the day. Rita Roy was to remain with Paquita in the Bradley cabin, as it was deemed not improbable that an attempt would be made to regain the little one.

If Donna Diablo in any way ascertained that her husband had been but slightly wounded by her bullet, she would, they felt assured, be perfectly frantic for revenge, and would make every effort that was possible to kill him, even to the sacrificing of her followers. This Rita Roy believed also.

The sheriff asserted that he should take a party of good men and endeavor to trail the bandits to their stronghold; and Peapod, accompanied by Nonita, as they had decided from the first, were resolved to search for Merle Montrose. They would inspect first the "sign" in the vicinity of the great gorge, and then the gorge itself, where the young man had fought the Apaches and rescued the Navajo maiden.

Having arranged matters in this manner, Rita Roy, Paquita and the young squaw returned to the cabin, and there prepared and partook of their morning meal, while Peapod and Boss Blazer joined the crowd at Buglepaint Bazaar, the former and the latter treating all hands. After this the arrangements for the day were explained; and all who remained in the town were cautioned to keep a sharp lookout for suspicious characters, who might be members of the outlaw band, and seeking to regain possession of Paquita.

It was only necessary to mention this danger, in order to insure a close watch and guard over the little one.

The greater part of the miners now went to their work, as they were in very little apprehension in the daytime.

The sheriff, with a dozen well-armed and mounted men, proceeded down the Notch, and turned up the range among the foot-hills; here and there finding trace of the night marauders, which encouraged them greatly. Some miles had been traversed in this way, when the ground became so rocky that it would have been next to impossible to have discovered the slightest trace of a party of horsemen who had passed over it a few minutes previous, unless the animals had been shod; and the bandits had taken the precaution, to bind some thick buffalo-hide over the hoofs of their animals.

As for Peapod and Nonita, they started in advance of the party of Boss Blazer, and urged their horses up the other side of the range; over the same course that the Indian girl had traveled, from the scene of her rescue to Nugget Notch, and where also the Wild Man had made his mad run after whisky, and back to his mountain cavern.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ON THE ALERT.

PEAPOD and Nonita made no pause until they reached the entrance of the great gorge. The professor had not, as yet communicated his suspicions, in regard to the Wild Man, to his companion; and, it was evident to him, that she entertained none in that direction.

Upon arriving at the point mentioned, they dismounted, and secured their animals. They then proceeded to inspect the scene of the fight, and a repulsive one it was.

The carcasses of the wolves, that had been killed by the Wild Man, caused great surprise. There were also, in the thickets, a number of coyotes with broken limbs; which, by striving to crawl deeper into the shades, revealed their presence to the searchers.

The young squaw explained the fight, and showed where each Apache had fallen; and Peapod, hastily examining the remains, counted seven who had been slain—the last of these having been quite recent, and having also been scalped.

"You said there were but six, Nonita," he remarked. "How is that?"

"There were but six," she said, holding up that number of fingers; "but one more has been killed since. Has Merle been here since the fight? He may have been captured, and escaped, and was again taken, after slaying one of his pursuers."

The eyes of the fair Navajo were filled with anguish and apprehension.

Indian though she was, and stoic by nature and habit, she found it impossible to control her emotions.

Peapod was greatly puzzled. The theory he had formed with reference to the Wild Man, was nearly cast aside.

But he spoke not.

He proceeded at once to the entrance of the immense ravine, and examined the ground for a long distance from the same; when, finally, he came upon the horse trail of the last six Apaches who had entered the gorge. He then became almost convinced that Merle had been taken captive—that another war-party had been in the rear of the one that had captured Nonita.

Yet, even this did not explain it, as several days must have elapsed before the second party came up.

Could it have been they who had slain the wolves and buzzards, and had one of their number been killed by the beasts?

No, this was improbable; and besides, this last savage had been scalped.

Thus reasoned the professor, becoming more and more perplexed each moment.

As he stood thus, his companion, who had continued searching around the scene of the fight, came running to his side with a glittering object in her hand. It was a glass stopple.

She passed it to Peapod.

"Eureka!" he exclaimed. "The Wild Man has been here. It was he who killed the last Apache. He stole the decanter from Big Bugle's bar before he took the demijohn. Nonita, I believe that Merle Montrose was taken by that maniac, when insensible, and carried to his cave."

The Navajo squaw gazed at him in silence. Peapod saw that his words had but increased her anxiety and anguish.

"Lead on to the old lunatic's cave," he said quickly, "if you can find the way. We'll soon settle the question. Perhaps the poor wretch is not at home, and in that case we can search his premises the more easily. I'll get the horses, and lead them down the range a short distance; secrete them there, and then join you."

Eagerly Nonita hastened to obey, crossing to the opposite side of the vast opening, to make her way up the side of the range, in the direction in which she had supposed the cave to be. She had taken little notice of the landmarks when she made her escape, having been too much terrified and excited to do so.

She had no intention of proceeding far by herself, for she held the Wild Man in superstitious horror. But she was not destined to go far beyond the point, at which she had parted from the professor.

At the base of the range, on the south side of the entrance to the gorge, was a belt of pines, which must be passed through before she could venture up, by a winding shelf, which she felt sure led toward the hermit's cave.

Within the shade of these pines, had long crouched the Wild Man of the Mogollons, who had, from his cave entrance, observed the head-decorated squaw, accompanied by a white man, ride up the range amid the foot-hills.

He had followed, creeping from rock to rock, Indian-like, and had reached the gorge almost as soon as had our friends.

He had watched their every movement with savage cunning, having resolved that he would again capture the pretty squaw; and that this time, she should not escape him.

When the Wild Man saw Nonita part from her companion, and approach his covert, he could hardly restrain himself from dancing with joy. He, however, realized that he would be obliged, not only to gag his intended captive, but that he must follow the pines up the gorge; here to seek hiding, until the darkness would allow him to reach his cavern home unobserved.

He had no fears or anxiety for the captive who was already there. Merle had now a plentiful supply of whisky, since the demijohn had arrived.

The Wild Man prepared himself for capturing the Navajo maiden, without alarming the man who might give him trouble.

Merle, in kindness, had placed around the neck of his keeper a large handkerchief, to prevent the sun from further burning the shoulders of one who, though holding him prisoner, had treated him with great kindness. Indeed, the young man firmly believed that his jailer had saved his life.

The maniac quickly unloosed the scarf from his neck, and making it up in a wad, crouched lower. He made not the slightest noise, a thick screen of pines and cacti effectually screening him.

On, with a step as light as that of a fawn, came Nonita, gazing ahead, but without the slightest suspicion of danger.

The moment her gay-colored skirt came in sight, the Wild Man sprang up; so quickly clutching her and thrusting the kerchief into her mouth, that the helpless maiden had no time to cry out. Indeed she could not have done so, for she was appalled for the moment with terror at beholding this fearful being, and finding herself once again in his strong clutch.

Gathering her in his arms, as previously, the Wild Man sped up the gorge beneath the dark shades of the pines, until a bend of the hurt break in the range allowed him to cross to the other side without danger of observation.

Fairly flying over the bed of the gorge, he made his way up the rugged wall on the opposite side, and crawled with his captive into the cave, where he had lain when drinking and sleeping during his long absence from Merle. Had Nonita been in the arms of a painted Apache, she would have maintained calmness, and would have scorned to betray her fear of the fate she could not but know would be hers.

But, as it was, so great was her terror, that she trembled like one stricken with the ague, al-

though she had previously been able to make her escape from the same strange being.

She did not believe, in her superstitious fear, that weapons would kill this Wild Man. She felt assured that, did she escape, he would overtake her, would know just where she might be hiding, and that he could see through the densest of thickets.

Her captor placed her in a sitting posture upon a rock in the semi-darkness of the low-roofed cave. Then he hastened outside and gathered a huge armful of dry leaves. These he brought in, formed a couch, and placed her upon the same.

Nonita knew that to attempt to escape would be useless, that it was in fact impossible.

The maniac of the mountains removed the handkerchief from her mouth, but she feared to scream out or in any way betray her presence to Peapod, lest the Wild Man should tear her to pieces. She feared, too, that if the professor should hear her and approach the cave to rescue her, the lunatic would kill him.

In her distress, the poor Indian girl forgot entirely the one bright side to this truly dark picture, which was, that when the Wild Man returned with her to his cavern home, she would ascertain if Merle Montrose were really there.

She dreaded to hear the sound of Peapod's step, or his voice calling to her; for she knew that her captor was a man of giant strength, and that he could pounce upon and overcome her white brother with ease, powerful though the latter was.

Thus the Wild Man of the Mogollons remained, guarding his fair prize; she sitting in the gloom, and no longer bound, but with not the remotest idea of attempting to escape from that subterranean apartment.

And all the while, Peapod looked in vain above the pine tops, as he led the horses below, for the Navajo maiden.

He secured the animals in haste, and then sped through the belt of pines; gaining an elevation above the trees, and a view along the side of the range southerly. But the young squaw was nowhere to be seen.

He knew that was the direction in which she was to travel; and also, that she could not, in that short space of time, have gotten over one quarter of the ground that was now spread out before his vision.

He gave a signal, that was known to them both, and which he knew could be heard as far as Nonita could possibly have gone since parting with him. But there was no response. He called, again and again, but all was silent.

Nonita had mysteriously disappeared.

Peapod then thought of Merle, and with that came the suspicion of the Wild Man.

Could it have been? But no, that was too terrible!

Merle first, and then Nonita—surely the gorge must be cursed. The poor Indian girl had escaped one awful fate, to be perhaps condemned to another as bad; while her rescuer had also lost his liberty, if not his life.

Peapod searched for "sign" on every side, but his search was fruitless. The maniac had been cunning for that.

Then he ran down, and out from the ravine, sprung upon his horse, and leading the other animal, rode rapidly down the range, such a distance as he believed must bring him to the vicinity of the cave. There he tied the horses, and made ready to climb the range.

As he gazed up the rough mountain-side he started for, afar toward the peaks, he discovered a moving object, which he made out to be a human being—a man, who was descending the steep; and coming directly toward him.

He was old, his beard was long, and his hair as well.

Peapod was astonished.

Could it be the Wild Man?

If so, what had become of Nonita?

The professor climbed, as fast as was possible, up the range, to intercept the man whom he had seen.

CHAPTER XXVII.

OLD MYSTERY'S MISERY.

THE bandit's captive was not as easy a one to manage as they had imagined.

He had, during the night, been working on the thoughts that bound his wrists; so when he had been returned to his rock-bound prison, and his guard had left for the entrance of the cave, he soon relieved himself from his bonds. Then, through a passage in the back of the cavern, which a projecting mass of rock hid from view, he made his escape by a long, winding passage.

Then he stole, Indian-like, up the side of the range; and, taking advantage of an elevated pass between two peaks, emerged on the opposite side. For he knew that the cave of the Wild Man was directly over the mountains from that of the outlaws.

He had nursed, as his pet object, the secret of the hidden chest of gold, which he hoped to obtain from Maurice Montrose, whom he had known in Texas; and whom he had chanced to meet and recognize at El Paso. From that place Old Mystery had accompanied him to the

Notch, where they had for some time lived together.

After Maurice had become so insane as to be troublesome, Old Mystery had inveigled him up the range, into the cave which had ever since been his abode, having carried needed articles there for his comfort.

Then Old Mystery had deserted his pard, but still kept close watch on him, with the ever-present view of the secret he was so determined some day to gain. It made him furious now to know that others were aware of his object, and he was resolved to balk the bandits.

He would now ascertain if the Wild Man still remained in his cavern, and would then speed to Nugget Notch, and lead the sheriff and his men to the bandits' stronghold, which was not as safe a place as they thought it, for he knew entrances, the existence of which they did not suspect.

Old Mystery's eyes were sharp, and although Buck Bradley was masked, he believed he could identify him. Thus, unknown to the outlaws, their aged captive had escaped, and was bent on their destruction.

He now halted, at sight of Peapod.

Could it be possible that still others had found out the secret of the Wild Man?

It must be so, he thought, or this man would not be thus heading toward those underground chambers. Old Mystery seated himself on a projection of rock that was hidden, and peeped down the steep side of the range.

He had not long remained thus, when he had to change his opinion in regard to the stranger, for the latter passed around the collection of huge rocks, in the midst of which was the entrance to the cave of the Wild Man, and climbed upward, directly toward his covert. Old Mystery was greatly relieved.

He began to believe that the man must be a stranger, who had lost his way.

Having come to this conclusion, he arose, and hastened down the steep, to meet the man who was coming nearer.

Neither of them had ever before seen the other. The professor was the first to speak.

"Pardon me, my pious pilgrim," he said, "but I am particularly curious to know why you promenade the pathless peaks that are so unfitted for a pedestrian of your years."

"I am Peapod, a perforator of perfidious pirates, when I can get my peepers on such cattle, and can't persuade them to hold up paws. Your physiognomy don't point toward a philosopher, and I don't put you down strong enough on piety to be a preacher."

"Here's a plateau, where you can plant yourself until your perspiration subsides; and then, if your tongue is pliable, you can give me a pleasant propounding of your position, in platitude or otherwise, as you please."

Old Mystery regarded the speaker, with a fixed stare of astonishment. He began to believe he had encountered a very peculiar monomaniac. He hesitated to speak, but seated himself, as invited.

"Plunge in, pilgrim; I don't wish to ply you with questions, beyond politeness, but my curiosity is poignant. Proceed, if you please, without perplexity."

"Stranger," said the old man, at length, "I might ask you to explain your presence in this wild place, but I refrain. For myself I have this day escaped from a band of outlaws, whose retreat is on the other side of this range of mountains."

Peapod was all attention at once.

"Do you know who commands them?"

"Captain Hold-up, and Donna Diablo."

"How came you in their power?"

"They captured me at Nugget Notch," was the reply. "They took me from my shanty in the night time. Donna Diablo had entered the town in disguise."

"Did they capture you for the purpose of robbery?"

Old Mystery hesitated a moment. He felt that he was cornered, but his wit got him out.

He must invent a story, and he did it.

"It was done for revenge. The bandit Queen insists that I killed one of her followers at Tombstone, although I was never there in my life."

Peapod was satisfied, and continued:

"As you lived at the Notch, you must have known Buck and Bill Bradley?"

"I know Buck Bradley. He is now one of the bandits, in league with 'Captain Hold-up.'"

"Do you know for what purpose?"

"Robbery, of course."

"And Bill Bradley?"

"He is not at the retreat. At least I saw nothing of him."

"Did you not know he had disappeared from Nugget Notch?"

"I did hear something to that effect, before I was captured."

"You, of course know the Wild Man?"

The question was so unexpected, that Old Mystery betrayed both anger and suspicion.

"I have seen him," he said, shortly.

"He has been in the town twice of late," remarked the professor.

The old man was thunderstruck.

Was it possible that Maurice Montrose was

in his senses? And could he have had anything to do with the disappearance of Bill Bradley? Thus thought the venerable schemer.

Again Peapod spoke.

"I have heard of you," he said, "and I know that you and the Wild Man once lived in a shanty at the Notch."

Old Mystery was more astounded than ever. He now felt positive that Peapod was on the trail of the secret. All at once this stranger seemed to know all about him.

Again the latter asked, abruptly:

"Do you know why I climbed the rocks to meet you just now?"

"No," was the reply. "How should I? You could not have known me at such a distance, and you can certainly have no important business with me."

"Pardon me, but I have. I'm peeping after the Wild Man, and propose that you proceed to propel at once to his palatial premises and present me. I'll force him to produce my pard, or there'll be a prospect of his being pulverized."

At first Old Mystery was furious. He determined, whatever might be the consequences, that he would not lead Peapod to the cave; but when Bill Bradley was mentioned, and the professor asserted that his mission was to get him from the power of the Wild Man, he was much relieved, and at once led Peapod to the cavern.

As the reader knows, their visit was in one sense opportune, as the crazed hermit was now at the gorge, there hiding Nonita until he felt sure Peapod had left the vicinity. Great was the joy of the latter on finding Merle, but the poor young man was in a sad state, being barely able to crawl from his couch.

He expressed little joy at seeing Old Mystery and Peapod, having known little of either; but he was glad to be taken from the cave, which had been a cell of horrors.

Old Mystery felt that the secret was safe.

The professor decided to take Merle to the Notch, and then return to search for Nonita, being confident that the Wild Man would soon bring her to his cave. Old Mystery agreed to remain and watch for the recluse.

He secreted himself in one of the passages, and had not long to wait, for soon the maniac appeared, bearing the young squaw in his arms. Old Mystery could see that she was greatly terrified.

Probably, as future events indicated, the Wild Man believed he could cause Nonita to feel contented in his cavern home, as he fancied Merle had become, though not in the same way.

At any rate, he acted as though he had important business on hand, and he was evidently determined that the Navajo maiden should not escape him a second time, for he quickly secured her ankles and wrists, and then rushed to the cave-chamber in which he had left Merle.

When he discovered that his captive had escaped, he gave a terrific yell, that fairly curdled the blood of both Nonita and Old Mystery. Then he seized the demijohn, and drank copiously.

He then made a thorough search of the caverns, Old Mystery having to dodge from one to another, to avoid discovery.

Finding no trace of Merle, he caught up the demijohn, and rushed from the cave, along the side of the range. As soon as he was gone, Old Mystery came forward. He told the startled Nonita that Peapod had been there, and that he had released Merle.

He then freed her from her bonds.

She felt rather indignant against Peapod, for having, as she thought deserted her; until the old man informed her that he had been left to watch, and to release her, and that her white brother was soon to return.

Fearful, however, that the Wild Man would be the first to do so, they both hastened down the range, and proceeded toward Nugget Notch; Old Mystery satisfied that he could gain nothing from the lunatic, in the state in which he then was, and even fearing for his life, should he remain.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SPEC' SPORT.

It had been, previously, dull and tame at the Notch; and not a few rejoiced that, from the arrival of the road-agents near the burg, livelier times might be anticipated.

Much interest was manifested in regard to the result of Boss Blazer's search for the stronghold of the outlaws; bets being made by many that the sheriff would, or would not, be successful on the trail.

The eventful night had rained blessings on the burg—that was generally asserted—and bright hopes were expressed for the future. Even Big Bugle found some consolation, in the general conversation to this effect, for the clipping of his nose, and the smashing of his glasses. Thus far, like the monte-dealers, he had been out of pocket; but the predictions of a glowing future cheered him and them amazingly.

Indeed, such was the enthusiasm, that the gamblers were told to keep cool for a short time, and they might get staked to start their games again; for the miners would have been lost, so to speak, and the town disgraced, if no games were going on.

There were more hangers on around Bugle-paint Bazaar, than on any previous day since the "slapping up" of the burg, and for good reasons. Some had taken so much whisky during the night, that they now felt only like trying to recuperate; and many were so anxious in regard to the safety of those absent from the Notch, that they could do nothing but talk over the probable consequences of the coming of Captain Hold-up and Donna Diablo into the vicinity.

At nine o'clock at night, about the time the Bandit Queen had arrived on the previous evening, the crowd, nearly as merry as ever, were in Bluepaint Bazaar.

The clatter of hoofs, on the plaza, announced an arrival. It was moonlight, and, at the first glance, the men of Nugget Notch recognized their pards. The full number had returned, with the addition of one horseman.

Cheers were given, and Boss Blazer waved his hand in recognition.

All rode up, and dismounted; the sheriff calling out, in a loud voice:

"Nary find, boyees! No sign o' Donna Diablo an' Cap'n Hold-up's crowd. S'arched ther range for fifteen mile. But hyer's a pilgrim from ther Grandee, what wants ter flip koerds wi' we-uns. We struck him on ther stage trail. Reckon he'll 'muse us fer ter-night, ef nothin' else turns up."

"What 'bout Peapod an' ther squaw? Hev they 'roved back?"

"Hain't showed up yet, sheriff; an' we-uns air gittin' worritated 'bout 'em."

All eyes were now fixed upon the stranger. He was gotten up in gorgeous Mexican style, in a black velvet suit, profusely ornamented with silver buttons. His head was crowned with a big black sombrero, he wore spectacles, and had a long black beard.

Before he had dismounted, he received a *sobriquet* from the miners. At least, one among them yelled out:

"Gaze at ther Spec' Sport, boyees!"

This name ran the rounds, amid much laughter. But the stranger noticed it not. He gave a general salute, saying:

"How-dy, pards o' Nugget Notch? Dog-goned glad ter drap in on yer. But I'm deuced dry. I'll see you later."

So saying, he led his horse between the shanties to the rear, to stake the animal.

The crowd moved into the bar again, in expectation of the advent of Spec' Sport; where they could view him by candle-light, and "size" him down much finer than by moonlight.

Soon he entered, preceded by Boss Blazer.

All noticed that he was well "heeled."

He walked with an independent air, as though he had as much right there as any one present, if not more. The sheriff had a weary and disgusted look, and snapped out the most surly replies to the questions put him with reference to his search.

Both strode up to the bar, the men who had been with Boss Blazer following, and no others; for it seemed understood by the crowd that the dry and dusty searchers should have their drink without interruption.

These seemed to think it their right.

All drank, and then Boss Blazer treated the crowd. Had any one suspected the stranger of being anything but square, they could not have failed to notice that he showed no surprise at the comical figure cut by the landlord. This would not have escaped Peapod had he been present.

Spec' Sport was, as the reader has doubtless decided, none other than Buck Bradley, most admirably disguised. He had ridden right into the lion's den, so to speak, agreeably to the plan of Donna Diablo.

Not far behind the sheriff and his party, there had been ten other equestrians, led by a slender young man. This was Donna Diablo, with nearly all of Captain Hold-up's band.

They had pack-mules loaded with camp outfits and "grub," and all were attired in coarse woolen shirts and soft hats. These camped on the plaza.

Before they arrived, however, Spec' Sport waved his hand to the crowd, saying:

"Seuse us, pards, but we-uns war thunderin' dry an' nigh 'bout wilted. Come up, all hands, an' pour p'ison. Reckon we kin stand another round."

A cheer for Spec' Sport was given, and all rushed to the bar. When all had drank, the men who had been up the range partook of a hearty supper. They then returned, and Boss Blazer introduced the stranger to the landlord. Spec' Sport at once negotiated for the privilege of opening a monte bank at one thousand dollars limit, and at once paid table rent for the night.

The dealers who had been broken by Donna Diablo were in a state of great excitement. They believed that they could win back all that they had lost.

Spec' Sport meant business, as was soon proved. Before, however, he opened his game, there came a yell from the front entrance. This was caused by the arrival of the band of strangers, who were now in their turn being welcomed to the burg.

These entered the bar, and were quickly greeted by Boss Blazer, who informed them that

the bar was free to them for the night, it having been agreed that the man who won the largest pile during the night was to pay their bills.

The strangers expressed their thanks, and were not backward in taking their drinks, asserting that they had come to locate claims and remain in the town.

In a little time they became mingled with the crowd, and Spec' Sport opened to a lively game, Big Bugle having been persuaded to stake with a few hundreds every monte-dealer who had been bankrupted by Donna Diablo.

Little did any of the men of Nugget Notch dream that the leader, or head man of the party of strangers who were habited as miners, was in reality Donna Diablo. Had they done so, there would have been a "circus" right there.

Had Spec' Sport been recognized by Buck Bradley, there would have been a "high old time" likewise.

However, as nothing of this kind was imagined for a moment, the prospects were that, beyond the excitement caused by the heavy betting—which was only to be expected—nothing would occur to the extent of amusing the "boys."

But, strange and terrible were the events that were destined to happen.

Peapod, with Merle Montrose, had arrived in the town without having been perceived by any of the citizens, and the former had taken his badly demoralized pard to the shanty of the Bradley brothers, where Rita Roy assisted in getting him to bed.

Nourishing food, with strong coffee, was given him; his face and head being bathed in cold water, and bandages of linen, saturated with the same and alcohol, were wrapped about his forehead.

The gentle little Paquita was assiduous in her attentions, and Merle seemed quiet and contented when he held the child's hand in his own.

It appeared too strange to the young man to be real—the scenes he was passing through seeming like a dream.

So weary and exhausted was Peapod, that he was obliged to rest for a time, but resolving that he would hasten back up the range and rescue Nonita as soon as he was satisfied that Merle was all right, and would not be violent. He therefore did not intend to reveal his presence to the citizens.

Great was the relief and pleasure of the watchers in the shanty when the Navajo maiden and Old Mystery walked into the cabin.

The young squaw at once, with every expression of delight, began to do all in her power for the comfort of the young man, now suffering so much from having so bravely rescued her from the Apaches.

Thus were our friends brought together in the cabin of the Bradley brothers, Peapod having made up his mind to remain there until fully rested.

Meanwhile important events were brewing, and parties were within Buglepaint Bazaar whom the Professor believed far up the range, and who, he did not dream, would dare set foot in the vicinity of Nugget Notch.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MUSIC IN THE AIR.

THERE was great surprise at the display of gold, made by Spec' Sport. It certainly raised him in the opinions of the men of the Notch.

Yet, there were those who were suspicious of the stranger; and especially the keen-witted monte-dealers, but they kept their own counsel. Buck Bradley knew these men well, and that no undue advantage would be taken of him; yet he had all he could do, to keep cool, knowing that he stood on the brink of a precipice.

Donna Diablo's visit, in disguise, was due chiefly to her intense anxiety in regard to Peapod. To carry out her plans, she had prevailed upon Captain Hold-up to take her men with him in his proposed attack upon the stage, she getting the American outlaws up in the guise of miners.

When the disguised bandits had entered Buglepaint Bazaar from the plaza, after attending to their stock, they had partaken of liquid refreshments at the bar; but Big Bugle had been so busy, and so much excited by the arrival of Spec' Sport, and the wholesale drinking that followed, that he paid little attention personally to the late arrivals.

But, as the party of pretended miners had walked away from the bar, the landlord had bestowed on them a glance of curiosity.

He dropped the glass he had been washing, and stared in astonishment at two of the strangers, who were now walking toward the gaming portion of the room.

"Gott in himmel!" burst from his lips.

An interruption at that moment would be considered a bad omen by the gamblers, and an interruption came from a quarter least expected, and one that promised fun.

Big Bugle was the man who started the "jamboree" of the night; for, the next moment, he clutched a revolver in each hand, cocked the weapons, and rushed madly after the two whom he had "spotted."

They had crowded up near the table.

"Make vay mit me! Make vay! I vcs look

for dem galoots vos now dree year, und py shinks I bores dem."

The miners crowded back.

They anticipated something rich, but were greatly puzzled notwithstanding.

"Look, poys!" he exclaimed, bounding in front of the disguised bandits; "look at Pig Pugle now, und say he not for can fight for his righuts. Hold up your hands, or I plows one hole through your heads already! Dot vos so."

"I knows you from vay back. You vos two of dem tam gowpoys vot shoots in mine ears dose holes. Now I shoots holes mit your ears, so help me gracious!"

The men of Nugget Notch crowded in a circle together. Revolvers were jerked, and instantly every man of the party who had recently arrived were "covered;" for all knew that the landlord had sworn to have revenge for the outrage that had been committed upon him in Texas.

The two bandits were not only astounded, but greatly terrified. They had no chance to clutch a weapon, and their way of escape was cut off. Buck Bradley drew his revolver to protect the bank.

The pair, thus confronted so unexpectedly by Big Bugle, turned pale as death. Up went their hands at the order of mine host, who proved the next moment that he was thoroughly in earnest.

"Keep up dose hants, or so help me, I shoots von hole mit your heads! 'Pout face, march! Valk shoot as vast as you can owit dot house, und owit dot purg of Nugget Nodge. Git!"

The bullets of the landlord, as he spoke, tore off the upper lobe of an ear on each of the men, and so filled with terror were they for their lives, seeing no sympathy in the crowd, and knowing their comrades were helpless to assist them, they strode, as ordered, side by side toward the door, and then stepped outside.

The rest remained in their places until the two mutilated men and Big Bugle had passed beyond them. Then they followed after, weapon in hand.

The landlord kept within three paces of his victims, with his pistols still presented, following them out into the moonlight.

Suddenly both the bandits whirled, knocking aside their foe's revolvers. At the same instant out shot two glittering knives from the belts of the mutilated men, and it seemed as if Big Bugle's moments were numbered.

But, before the steel that flashed in the moon's rays could descend, two sharp reports rung out on the air, and both of the disguised bandits threw up their arms for the last time. They fell backward upon the plaza, both shot through the brain.

The crowd rushed out, in a demoralized mass, Boss Blazer striving to keep order.

The landlord was the most astonished man among them.

His revolvers lay in the dust.

He had seen the glittering knives when they were raised, and had closed his eyes, feeling he was doomed. When again he opened them, his assailants lay on the plaza—the stamp of death on their faces.

Yet there was not a soul in sight.

They had been shot by some person, or persons, concealed behind the hotel, for not one of the miners had crossed the threshold at the time the shots were fired.

"I vill gif von 'tousand tollar to de bilgrims vot safes mine life—I vill, py shimony gracious!" was the grateful exclamation of Big Bugle, as soon as he could articulate.

To say that the men of the Notch were astonished at the event, and its tragic ending, which was also so mysterious, would be putting it mild. As soon as the sheriff could collect some of his scattered wits, he asked:

"Air yer plum-sartain, Big Bugle, that them's some o' ther galoots, what tied yer up in Texas, an' bored yer years?"

"I dakes mine pible oath on dot. Dose vcs two of dem gussed gow-poys, vot I vos sware to gill already. I tropes dem down easy mineselluf, py plowing off dere ears mit demselves; but somebodies tropes dem down hard, dot last dimes."

The faces of the dead men were scrutinized by all, but no one remembered having met them before. The other bandits, signaled by Donna Diablo, had followed the crowd, for the sake of appearances.

Buck Bradley remained at his post, pistol in hand, guarding his bank, and the stakes of those who had laid their money down, and which he would not allow to be taken up; but Buck was now terribly frightened, in fact he was unfit to deal the cards. However, he knew he was in for it; and he could neither back out, nor run out.

One of the pretended mining immigrants, by request of the others, now informed the crowd of citizens, that they knew nothing in regard to the character of the two men who had been shot, as they had joined their party but a few miles from the Notch.

Boss Blazer ordered all hands away from the slain, asserting that an inquest would come in good for a change in the morning.

The delighted landlord was highly complimented, on having a "heap of sand," which no one

else had ever suspected he possessed; but, if they had considered the facts of the case, they would have been forced to conclude, that there had been but little "sand" required, to carry out the programme, as arranged and acted upon by Big Bugle.

A great deal of curiosity was manifested, as to who the unknown marksman had been—no trace of him being found.

Big Bugle "set 'em up" for the crowd, when all re-entered Buglepaint Bazaar; the worthy host caressing his nose, and thrusting his fingers into the bullet-holes in his ears, to satisfy himself that he was awake, and that his oath of vengeance had been kept.

All having drank, they returned to the monte bank, to be welcomed by smiles from Spec' Sport, who said:

"Now, yer kin take up yer bets, boyees, an' I'll give a fresh deal."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE RECOGNITION.

SPEC' SPORT had certainly kept remarkably cool, but the other outlaws were in no enviable frame of mind. Yet they could not get out of the fix they found themselves in.

They had, also, fears in connection with the dealing of the game by Buck Bradley; for, in some dispute he might get a blow that would disarrange his disguise. In that event, Donna Diablo was to make a break to secure the bank and call upon them to assist. But few, in such a case, would be able to escape with life.

The game proceeded, but another interruption was at hand. Only a few hundred dollars had the bank lost on the first deal. On the second deal, after two lay-outs had been formed, and but a small sum bet, as no favorite cards were yet cast on the board, Buck Bradley had but just turned the deck, when a fearful shriek shot through the Bazaar.

Every man in the room started and gazed in wonder.

They were not to remain long in suspense.

Again that wild cry was heard, and the next moment, in mad bounds, the Wild Man sprang into the room. Under one arm he held a basket formed of green branches.

He darted toward the Spec' Sport, and, tearing off the top of his basket, he drew out a huge rattlesnake and cast the loathsome reptile in such a manner as to cause it to coil around Sport's neck the moment the hold of the Wild Man relaxed. Then, quick as thought, another snake was flung at the disguised Bandit Queen, and soon serpents were flying through the air, hissing madly, in every direction.

Shrieks of horror filled the room, in which mingled the maniac laughter of the Wild Man.

But, before this general and furious distribution of reptiles, there was a pause made by the crazed being, and many which had naturally been directed to Spec' Sport and the supposed leader of the company of newly-arrived miners, beheld what more than ever astonished them.

Buck's spectacles flew off, and his beard was drawn from his face; while the sombrero falling from the head, let down a great mass of raven hair, and revealed the young miner as Donna Diablo!

Such horrified faces as these two presented, while they tore at the serpents that encircled their necks, can scarce be imagined.

But they had no idea that they had betrayed themselves.

Such a thought had not entered their minds.

Yet both had been recognized by many present; and these stood silent, while a perfect pandemonium reigned around them.

It was simply awful, as strong men, trembling with terror, tore writhing snakes from them, and hurled the hideous things upon others. A rush was made, to escape into the plaza. Men fell over each other, tables and benches were overturned, and Big Bugle began to think that, this time, the Wild Man was scooping in the town, and that he himself was totally ruined, even were he so fortunate as to escape death.

Above it all, rung the dread outcries of the maniac.

This Babel of sounds caused Peapod, with Rita Roy and Nonita, to rush toward Buglepaint Bazaar, the squaw being in the rear. Merle Montrose also crawled from his couch, and tottered to the door.

The Navajo maiden had not gone far, her two companions being now some distance in advance, when, out from the ribbon of pines, bounded the Wild Man, with a triumphant peal of laughter!

He gathered her in his arms, and sped toward the wall of the Notch.

Not more than three bounds had he made, however, when the revolver of Merle rung spitefully, and the maniac fell to the earth, both his prizes slipping from his relaxed grasp—Nonita and a bag of gold—for he had grasped the bank of Buck Bradley, and had "raked in" the ten thousand dollars. The great din in Buglepaint Bazaar prevented Peapod and Rita Roy from noticing the report of the pistol.

Paquita, awakened from sleep, ran to the door of the cabin, in time to see Merle sink senseless on the threshold.

The Indian maiden rushed forward to his assistance, while she directed the little girl to bring restoratives.

Then the attention of both was drawn toward the point where the Wild Man lay, by a yell of baffled rage, and they saw Old Mystery bending over the apparently dead lunatic. But, he remained not long in that position. He bound the ankles and wrists of the fallen man fast, and then ran toward the plaza, where a fierce conflict was now raging.

We will here state that Old Mystery had secured a revolver, upon his reaching the cabin, and, with it, had stolen to the side of Buglepaint Bazaar. While there, he had recognized a number of the outlaws, who had treated him so outrageously, and from whom he had escaped.

He was there crouched, when Big Bugle forced the two bandits out upon the plaza; and, when they turned to slay the landlord, he had shot them both through the brain.

Intensely eager to know every movement of the Wild Man, and to be near the latter should he be fatally injured and in that condition have a lucid moment, Old Mystery kept close watch. It was thus that he hoped, at last, to obtain possession of the maniac's secret.

He watched the Wild Man speeding to the pines and hastily followed him.

Then he heard the pistol-shot, and, to his intense fury, soon saw the recluse apparently lifeless; but upon investigation he found that the bullet had merely torn along the skull, rendering him insensible.

Much relieved, Old Mystery bound the Wild Man, and hurried back to the Bazaar to avenge himself upon the bandits, if in his power; and without having perceived the bag of gold which lay but a few feet from the unconscious man whom he had secured.

Nonita had no sooner satisfied herself that Merle Montrose had only fainted from weakness than she left him to the care of Paquita, for her anxiety was great in regard to Peapod, as she could plainly hear the fearful noises from the plaza.

The latter, when he came in sight of the entrance of Buglepaint Bazaar, was the most surprised person imaginable, with the possible exception of Rita Roy, who soon joined him. Both halted for a moment in sheer astonishment.

And well they might.

Out from the door, head over heels, came a mingled mass of humanity, all yelling like fiends. But once in the moonlight these men sprang to their feet. Yet the stream of howling human beings continued to pour out.

One of these, partially recovering himself, discovered Peapod and rushed toward him, shouting:

"Thar's ther devil to pay inside! Ther Bazaar air chuck-full o' snakes! Ther Wile Man, an' ther road-agents air thar, an' Donner Diablo, an' Buck Bradley, er I'm a liar, an' you kin shoot me!"

Our two friends could not understand what the miner meant, except what he said in reference to Buck Bradley and the Bandit Queen. They hurried forward, however, when Old Mystery was seen shooting down two more of the outlaws, who had sprung from the entangled mass.

Nonita then joined them.

Gradually the situation was made clearer.

Peapod was thunderstruck at the bare idea of Donna Diablo and Buck Bradley's having had the audacity to enter the town.

"We've got 'em corraled, pard Peapod!" yelled one of the citizens.

Soon, at the command of the sheriff, the miners formed a half-circle in front of the hotel entrance; but, strange to say, not a bandit was now anywhere to be seen.

"Dang'd ef I doesn't b'lieve they tuck out ther back door," exclaimed Boss Blazer. "Come on, some on ye, an' we'll 'vestergate!"

The sheriff with a score of miners rushed around a corner of the building and down between the same and the shanty next to the rear entrance.

Peapod sprung at once inside Buglepaint Bazaar, and striking a light, gained a view of the gaming department.

Nonita, with Rita Roy and a squad of miners, followed.

The sight was a terrible one.

Several of the miners had been stabbed, or lay dying, doubtless by the bandits before the lights had been extinguished.

Rattlesnakes lay coiled here and there, ready for a spring while their warning sounded.

But the outlaws were gone, and the gold was gone also.

Loud cries now filled the room.

Big Bugle, hearing the voices of friends, crawled out from hiding, but when he beheld the scene in the rear portion of his establishment, he climbed up on the bar where he determined to remain until there were no longer any serpents in his Eden.

As Boss Blazer and those with him reached the rear entrance, they too realized that their game had fled.

Just then Old Mystery rushed in from the plaza, yelling:

"Come on, men of Nugget Notch! The bandits are seeking their horses to escape!"

Then there was a rush indeed from the building.

The professor darted off for his horse, the Navajo maiden following, and the pair soon spurred out into the plaza, ready for business.

The mob of miners rushed toward the east side of the square, where the disguised bandits had secured their animals.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ATTACKING THE STAGE.

THE Concord coach had reached a point quite near to Nugget Notch, indeed it was within a hundred yards of the entrance to the Notch, before the driver discovered the band of road-agents, dashing headlong in the rear of the vehicle.

It had been evidently, a lucky moment for Meta Montrose, when the driver had deviated, on her account, from the regular but more rocky stage trail; but it proved a very unlucky proceeding for the Jehu himself, as will be shown. Captain Hold-up was now in a position, which might result in the destruction of his band.

He well knew, however, that it would be almost impossible to capture Meta, once she got into the town. Besides this, he would feel greatly disgraced in the eyes of Donna Diablo and Buck Bradley, should he make a failure.

Consequently, as soon as the bandit chief spurred alongside, he leveled his revolver, and yelled to the driver:

"Kick brakes! Jerk up, and up with your paws, or you're a dead man!"

The driver was both brave and chivalrous, and he had a young lady on board, besides being quite near the town; so, instead of holding up, he whipped up.

But, crack went the revolver, and the gallant fellow sprang forward, falling upon the backs of the wheelers, with a bullet through his brain. This, with the yells of the Greasers, so startled the horses that they sprang, in a mad gallop, up the Notch trail.

It was, therefore, impossible for the bandits to pass the stage and halt the team. There were no "outsides" that trip, and but four men inside with Meta Montrose.

Providentially, the hind boot was well filled with baggage, or the Mexicans might have killed all within the stage, by firing through the back of it.

Captain Hold-up was furious.

Just as the outlaws charged up, in an endeavor to pass the coach, the passengers took aim, and two Greasers fell dead.

Nearly to Nugget Notch the band sped in pursuit, the foremost only neck-and-neck with the wheelers. Then a peculiar whistle shot through the air—the signal of the Bandit Queen for help.

With fierce yells of vengeance, the Greasers dashed on, the team turning from the trail, to enter the plaza on the south, in place of the east side, where Donna Diablo and the white bandits were then hastily equipping their horses.

Very fortunately, the men who had been with Boss Blazer, searching for the cave of the outlaws, had staked their horses near the shanties, and these now rushed to make ready, and gallop in pursuit of the band.

Buck Bradley, as well as Donna Diablo, had escaped being bitten by the rattlesnakes.

As the coach came up, without driver, and apparently without passengers, a vengeful whoop broke from the miners. The situation of affairs was plain to all. This was the work of the bandits under Hold-up, who had been signaled by Donna Diablo to her assistance.

No further attention was given to the stage, but, with increased yells, the miners rushed onward—the sheriff having given orders to cut off the retreat of the bandits.

Well it was that this order was given.

Peapod and Nonita dashed ahead of all, and struck between the shanties, at the same point at which they had previously entered the town. They sped through the belt of pines, and before them, not twenty yards distant, was Donna Diablo, in her mining costume, but her hat having been lost, her long hair betrayed her.

She had six bandits with her, all now spurring madly to join Captain Hold-up, who, with but four Mexicans, galloped to her assistance. These whirled their horses, and were ready to ride with the approaching party, down the Notch trail, in retreat. But, they were not to escape so easily.

Peapod and Nonita at once opened fire, and a hail of lead, from the mounted men under Boss Blazer, followed. Every horse fell, while half the remaining outlaw gang lay dead, in the dust of the trail.

The Bandit Queen jerked her horse to its haunches, just as she discovered the mounted miners—thus avoiding their volley.

Then, perceiving Peapod in the company of Nonita, she dashed, in jealous fury, toward the pair, resolved to kill them both, if she must die, for she knew her time had come.

She leveled her pistol at the young squaw, with a cry of rage, but the revolver of the latter spoke an instant sooner, and the Outlaw Queen fell from her horse, dead.

The surviving bandits, five in number, including Captain Hold-up and Buck Bradley, all more or less severely wounded, were surrounded by the mob of miners. They were speedily secured, and carried to the plaza, where the citizens all congregated.

The stage-horses had halted opposite Bugle-paint Bazaar, and the sheriff, with Peapod, opened the doors, and gazed inside. Nonita hastened up with a candle.

Out were dragged the corpses of four passengers, riddled with bullets.

Then the professor uttered an exclamation of mingled astonishment, horror, and anxiety, for he beheld, upon the floor of the coach, in the rear of the vehicle, none other than poor Meta Montrose, whom he had believed safe at Tucson.

The poor girl appeared to be dead.

Nonita quickly entered the coach, and raised Meta in her arms, passing the insensible form to Peapod, who at once carried the unconscious maiden to the cabin of the Bradleys. The young squaw followed, and soon they were delighted to see her revive, and to know that she was unhurt.

Great was the rejoicing of all, at their wonderful success in breaking up the outlaw band—the gang having, as it seemed, been led by destiny into the town, and to their doom.

Boss Blazer sent out a party of men, to recover the body of the stage-driver.

The first discovery made by the professor, upon leaving Meta in the cabin, was nothing less than that of the Wild Man. He was seated upon the ground, tied hand and foot, and the blood was flowing through his matted hair.

He was a frightful picture to look upon.

But, Peapod could but see that the strange being's face and eyes no longer showed a sign of insanity. Instead, he gazed at him, in the utmost wonder and bewilderment, as if he had but just awakened from a long and profound slumber, and knew not where he was, or what had been going on around him.

Peapod advanced and spoke to him, and the Wild Man replied in a perfectly sane manner. He begged to be told what was the disturbance, where he was, and how long a time he had been asleep. The professor was delighted, for he knew that the bullet which had struck and glanced along the skull of the Wild Man had in a miraculous manner caused him by the concussion to regain his normal condition of brain.

He bade him remain quiet, telling him that all would be explained to him soon.

As he turned away, he saw the bag of gold, which he knew the Wild Man must have brought from Buck's table, so he carried it into the cabin, for the present concealing it.

Merle was by this time sleeping, and Rita Roy had just returned from the plaza. He had recalled the fact that his little daughter might be abducted by the Maniac of the Mountains, and he soon found that, but for the lucky shot of Merle Montrose, much wrong might have been done by the Wild Man.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LOVE WAS LORD OF ALL.

BOSS BLAZER and Peapod toiled nobly the greater part of the remainder of the night to get the men of the town all back into a calm and reasoning state, to hold the captives secure, and to make comfortable those who needed their care and attention.

The Wild Man was placed in a cabin by himself and supplied with nourishing food, after which Peapod had a long conversation with him.

The insane portion of the poor man's life was, mercifully, a total blank, but he did remember that his daughter had died by poison, given her by him through mistake.

He was now told the truth in regard to it, and also the perfidiousness throughout of his wife and her son. He was informed that Merle and Meta Montrose, his nephew and niece, were in a cabin near at hand.

Maurice Montrose was then left and advised to sleep, being assured that happiness was in store for him. He was quite overcome by his emotion, and was greatly bewildered. This was not to be wondered at.

Meta, having recovered, was overjoyed to find herself not only with her friends, but that also Merle, her long-lost brother, was sleeping soundly near her. It all seemed too good to be true, but when Peapod informed her that he would introduce her to her uncle in the morning, she could hardly believe her senses.

It was strange, also, as Nonita now told them, that Merle should have shot at his own uncle, and that his bullet should have been the means of transforming the Wild Man of the Mogollon Mountains into a sane and rational being.

The sun arose the next morning, bright and beautiful; but, long before that time, the men of Nugget Notch were astir and busy. The past night had been one filled with startling and tragic events; and, when it became generally known that Bill Bradley had been found, that he was the brother of the maiden who had arrived in the stage, and that the Wild Man was their uncle, and had regained his senses, the surprise of the citizens was great.

Rita Roy was informed that his false and un-

womanly wife, Donna Diablo, was dead, but neither he nor Paquita saw the corpse—indeed, the little one was not told of the tragic end of her mother.

Buck Bradley had been wounded, and he knew he must die by the rope, with those who had been leagued with him. The thought of this broke the wretch down entirely, and he confessed to Merle and his uncle, when they were brought before him, all the fiendish doings of himself and mother. Thus Merle Montrose learned of his own innocence; and poor old Maurice, that his daughter had been the victim of that vile adventuress, Clare La Croix.

It is unnecessary to add, that the perfidious plotter was hanged like a dog.

Merle and Meta, with their newly found uncle, took up their abode in the shanty known as the Bradley cabin, until all felt more like themselves.

Nonita was ever attentive to their wants and wishes, and Peapod as well; while Rita Roy and his little daughter remained in the adjoining cabin.

The love of Nonita for Merle Montrose had been manifest, by her braving danger and death for him, and for his sister; and, ere long, the young man grew to be as much in love with the beautiful Navajo.

After the hanging of the bandits, the men of the Notch held a jollification, during which Peapod was chosen chief; and those who have had our sympathies gratified the miners, by appearing together on the plaza, and having a general congratulation.

Big Bugle was proud to point to his nose, in after days, and say:

"You shoost look at dot! Vell, dot scar vos made by von she tufils pefore she gets took in owt the dew."

As a matter of course, Peapod was called upon to give one of his peculiar addresses on the occasion; but we will not tax the patience of the reader by giving it here.

The gold was handed over to the sheriff for equal distribution among the families of the miners who had been killed—this disposition of it being agreed upon by a unanimous vote.

Meta had ample means with her, and her uncle informed her and Merle that he did know where their father had concealed a considerable fortune, which he had saved expressly for them; and that they would both be wealthy upon returning to Texas.

It was not until the day following that Old Mystery was missed, and search made for him. His dead body was found in his old shanty, and a wound upon it, which he had probably received from one of the bandits in the fierce fight on the plaza.

When the Montrose family had fully recovered they departed from the Notch, accompanied by the professor and Nonita. Rita Roy and his little daughter joined them as far as Tucson, where Paquita was to be placed at school.

And a grand "send-off" they received from the men of Nugget Notch, some of whom traveled to Tucson, three months later, to be present at a double wedding, Merle Montrose and Nonita, the Navajo, being united in the holy bonds at the same time with Meta and Prentiss Pierce, whom we have known as Peapod, "The Prince of Pan-Out."

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